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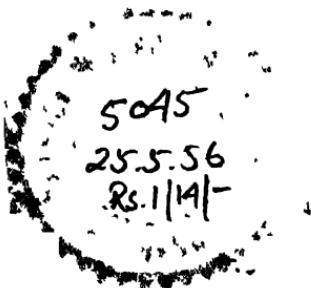
Book No. 25 5-56

Accn. No. 50 45

Date 25.5.57.

Red Herrings Unlimited

WINIFRED FORLING



ANDREW DAKERS LIMITED
LONDON

*Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Jarrold and Sons Ltd
Norwich*

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Chapter I

BETTER SHORT OF PENCE THAN SHORT OF SENSE

“I never saw a purple cow,
I never hope to see one;
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I’d rather see than be one.”

arbled Lyntie Dimsdale, running up the steps to the front door of her beautiful Jacobean home, Fairmeads. As she reached it, it was open to reveal a very correct butler.

“However did you know I was there, Daybreak?” she demanded. “I hadn’t even knocked once.”

“I ’eard you singing, Miss Lyntie. The Master said I was to be on the look-out because of the snow.”

“Really, anyone would thi I was made of sugar or salt,” grinned Lyntie. “Poor Uncle Bernard can’t real weather doesn’t hurt a modern schoolgirl. Schoolgirl, that reminds me, school’s over for four whole weeks. Catch my bag of books, Daybreak, and hide it in the family dungeons till January 20th. If I so much as see the cover of a history book or a compass, I’ll have you court-martialled.”

“Very good, Miss Lyntie,” said the butler coolly, but his eyes were dancing. “Sir Bernard is waiting for you in the library, miss. I’ll be bringing in tea at once.”

“Splendid. Mind there’s a huge pile of toasted tea-cakesrimming in butter,” laughed Lyntie, as she kicked off her overshoes and ran to the library to join her uncle. “Here I am, St. Bernard,” she cried, flinging open the door, “Oh, what a heavenly fire!”

“I put on another log, my dear, when I heard you come in,” Sir Bernard Allardyce said quietly. “I know how you love flames to light our tea-hour.”

“You’re a pet, and I adore you. Not because you spoil me so hopelessly, but because you’re you. Life at Fairmeads is so different from what it was at Gylverton Bay, and even after

months of luxury I still wonder sometimes if I shall wake up and find it's all a dream."

There was an unusual seriousness in Lyntie's tones that made her uncle glance at her curiously.

"You're growing up, my dear," was all he said.

"Yes," agreed Lyntie, frowning, "I suppose I am. I ought really to be thinking about my future and what I'm going to be, but it's so difficult to think ahead when the present's so marvellous. Miss Ticehurst had a serious talk to me to-day, St. Bernard, and I'm still under the influence of it, I suppose. Sometimes I think Van was lucky to have a career before she found you and Fairmeads and security."

"Hmp. You *are* growing up, child." There was a note of regret in Sir Bernard's voice that Lyntie was quick to notice.

"Only in patches, darling," she cried, her eyes dancing mischievously. "I'll be as young as you like this Christmas and hang up my stocking and pull crackers with you and—and kiss Day-break under the mistletoe," she cried with a giggle, as the butler entered with the tea trolley.

"Is it *still* snowing?" asked Sir Bernard. "One almost forgets what is happening outside, once the curtains are drawn."

"Rather!" Lyntie sounded pleased. "I'm so glad it's going to be a white Christmas. Usually Christmas is depressingly green and slushy. But I've known for a month now that there'd be ice this time."

"Have you?" Jow?"

"Because Mrs. Bardon said so. There's an old proverb, well known in these parts evidently, that goes like this: 'If at Holland-tide¹ the ducks swim, at Christmas time they'll slide.'"

"You *are* a girl for proverbs," laughed Sir Bernard. "I used to think I knew a lot, but you can cap anything I say at any time."

"Miss Cardew started the good work, and you have gone on with it, Uncle mine," Lyntie grinned. "By the way, I'm thrilled Sid Scroggins is coming for Christmas. It'll be the first time the Octocats¹ have all been together since the summer."

"I hope it doesn't mean upsets and adventures," sighed Sir Bernard ruefully. "I am growing too old for shocks."

¹ Martinmas, November 11th.

² See *The Allardyce Adventure*.

"*You've* no right to talk," objected Lyntie. "It was all your fault last time. You ran away, and we courageously tried to find you. It was thrilling while it lasted, and I must own I could do with a spot of excitement again now. School's fun in a way, but it's all rather dull and humdrum. Perhaps Sid will arrive full of ideas to brighten the holidays."

"If that young man doesn't behave himself, back to London he goes," said Sir Bernard grimly. "Mason knows, or ought to, how I feel about children being neither seen nor heard."

"You would love to be a bear, wouldn't you, pet?" chuckled Lyntie. "And most people take you at your own valuation. I suppose that was why you were known in the Law Courts as 'The Hugger'."

Sir Bernard frowned, then he chuckled.

"I don't know who told you about that name, Lyntie. I quite thought it had been forgotten ages ago. I haven't heard it for years. True, when I was one of His Majesty's judges, I was known as The Hugger. My friends claimed that I hugged them with affection, while the members of the underworld declared I was always ready to hug them—~~to~~ death."

"St. Bernard, how awfull!" gasped Lyntie, her eyes large and bright. "Did you really have to condemn people to death?"

"The verdict is the responsibility of the jury, but of course I had to sum up, and I also had to actually pass sentence on the poor devils. People thought I was hard-boiled, but I always hated donning the black cap. This isn't a very Christmassy conversation, child, so let us forget that such a person as The Hugger ever existed, and remember only the benevolent Father-Christmassy Saint Bernard you see before you."

"You are all that, of course," Lyntie agreed with a laugh, "but you'll be heaps more exciting now that I know you have such an interesting past. By the way, it was Miss Lethbridge who told me about your old nickname."

"Then she's a bigger nuisance than I thought her," snapped Sir Bernard with pretended heat. "She talks far too much and lets her imagination run riot. Always keep yours in check, Lyntie."

"But I can't if I'm to write books," Lyntie objected. "Still, I've promised Miss Ticehurst not to think about writing till I'm

through with school. Are you wanting the car to-morrow, Sir Bernard, or may we have it to go into Brighton for Christmas shopping?"

"Who are *we*?" asked Sir Bernard dryly. "You and Vanessa?"

"No, I meant the Octocats. Van won't be home till late to-morrow. She's wedded to her job so completely that she can't tear herself away from Heronscourt. I think I should hate to be an English mistress in a big girls' school. You have to be so correct and dignified when you're dying for some fun, but Van seems to thrive on it."

"Why don't you put off your shopping expedition till Thursday or Friday, Lyntie? Vanessa may want to shop, too, and she won't care to go alone."

"All right," agreed Lyntie quickly. "The Bardon twins can't come in any case, and if Van and Desmond, Aprille, August, and I all squeeze into the back, Sid and Tilly can go in front with Dakers. The things we buy can go in the boot, or be sent if they're too big. But won't you be lonely if we all go off for the day and leave you? Or will you come, too? We'd love to have you, and some of us could easily sit on the floor."

"No, no, I'm too old for a day's shopping in Brighton, and the Christmas crowds would kill me. Go on Friday, Lyntie, and then I'll not miss you."

"Not miss me indeed! Why?"

"Because Paul Lutwyche is coming down on business, and as I know him, he'll stay on and keep an old friend company if he's asked to."

"Oh, good. That's a splendid solution. We'll definitely decide on Friday, then, and I'll ring up the Pennrose-Eyres and the Rectory. Sid and Tilly can please themselves about coming. Sidney may have done his shopping in London, but I know Tilly's yearning to visit G.B.W.'s."

"G.B.W.'s?" queried Sir Bernard, carefully choosing a buttery tea-cake.

"God Bless Woolworth's," Lyntie explained promptly. "Of course, now that you keep me so splendidly supplied with pocket-money, I can afford to be more choosey, but I used to patronise Woolworth's almost exclusively, and so I can understand and sympathise with Tilly. I know you pay Muzzle well, but he and

His wife are thrifty folk, and Tilly only gets a shilling a week pocket-money and has to buy all her presents out of that."

"Excellent training," approved Sir Bernard. "I'm beginning to think you have far too much to spend. I must discuss it with Lutwyche on Friday. I believe in shifting my burdens on to the shoulders of my lawyer."

"You're not worried about anything, are you, darling?" asked Lyntie anxiously. "You said Mr. Lutwyche was coming on business."

"Nothing you need worry your curly head about, child. I am not as well off as I once was, but who is in these days? When there's need for you to economise I'll tell you, never fear."

"That's a promise," declared Lyntie, "and I know you always keep your promises. Are we costing you too much, St. Bernard? Of course, Van could be self-supporting at once if necessary, and I could leave school and begin to write, if it would help."

"And make a fortune with your first mighty opus, I suppose," teased her great-uncle. "Don't be an infant, Lyntie. Stay at Heronscourt till your education is properly finished, and I'll promise you I won't go bankrupt or sell Fairmeads. When is Van's friend coming?"

"On Saturday, I think. She'll have to stay with Miss Lethbridge till the last minute, and she only sails on Saturday. I can't understand why she isn't taking Valerie with her. Eminent novelists usually need their secretaries."

"I understood that your idol was going for a three-weeks' cruise, and that she was going incognito. In that case her secretary would be merely an encumbrance."

Lyntie nodded silently.

"You're right, of course, as always. I'm glad Valerie's coming, for Van's sake. We're all too young for her, really, though she never lets us feel it. Have you heard anything more about the new owner of Mrsdsdale Manor? I suppose you'll be calling on him soon. He has arrived, hasn't he?"

"Yes, and if Vanessa is free, I think we will go over on Saturday," Sir Bernard answered. "If, as I understand, the young fellow knows no one in England, he'll have a pretty lonely Christmas unless we ask him here."

Lyntie frowned.

"Must we? Oh, I know that sounds horribly ninky-slinky, but Christmas is such a family season, somehow, and—" she broke off, flushing. "Sorry, darling; I'm growing selfish. Of course Mr. Whatever-his-name-is must be asked, and I'll be perfectly sweet to him. Perhaps he'll be awfully nice, and then it won't be a sacrifice at all. It must be ghastly to be lonely at Christmas. Even in our worst days I always had Van. Shall I buy him a present to put under the tree?"

"Something small, perhaps. Of course, he may not come, in which case you wouldn't need a present, but if he does—and I've a feeling he will—we can't leave him out."

Everyone was in high spirits when they set off for Brighton on Friday morning. Even Vanessa was excited and eager to search the shops for the presents she still needed.

"How are we going to manage?" she asked, as the car drove off down the drive. "We'll have to divide up, or else there won't be any surprises on Christmas morning."

"That's a good idea, Van," approved Lyntie. "We could have family parties this morning, and change over after lunch."

"What about me?" asked Desmond Halliday, the Rector's son. "Aprille and August can pair off, and you two, Lyn. Sid can go with Tilly; but what about me?"

"Oh, we'll have you this morning," laughed Lyntie, "and after lunch you can go off with August and Sid, and Van can nurse-maid Tilly. If I get a penn'orth of surprise for Spring this morning, she and I can stick together till tea-time."

"Some people have a gift for arranging things," remarked Aprille with a chuckle. "Don't ruin yourself to fill my stocking, Lyn, will you?"

"Where shall we meet for lunch?" questioned August, looking at Vanessa. "They do you pretty well at Bertie's, or there's always Lyons."

"We went to a jolly decent place in the summer, didn't we, Spring? They put up a pretty good show for two bob."

"I shouldn't think we'd get enough for two bob," objected August. "Still, we can always buy sandwiches or buns at one of the stores and eat them in Woolworth's."

"I'm responsible for lunch," declared Vanessa firmly, "and it's going to be a proper one. I promised Uncle Bernard we'd all have enough to eat, so you needn't worry, August. We'll meet at Bertie's at half-past twelve. I'll tell Dakers to book a table for seven for then, so don't be late."

"Whiz-ho!" cried Desmond. "Bertie's is super. I've only been here once, with my godfather. The parents never patronise anywhere but Lyons. That's what the Church does for you. By the way, Lyntie, can you suggest something I can buy Sir Bernard? He's so jolly decent to us, and we can do so little to show our appreciation."

Lyntie frowned thoughtfully.

"Men are difficult," she mused. "I couldn't think of anything for ages. In desperation I asked Mrs. Mason, and she told me he needed some woolly bedsocks. That means a trip to Jaeger's. Does anyone else want to go there?"

No one spoke for a moment, then Aprille said:

"Mummy wants a warm scarf, I know. Would a Jaeger one be too ruinous? If not, I'm sure she'd love it."

"Good. Then we'll go there this afternoon, Aprille. Where do you want to go first, Van?"

"Berkshire's, I think. You can always find novelties there. I've a list as long as your arm."

"I have to get a present for the new owner of Marsdale Manor," Lyntie told them. "St. Bernard says he mustn't be left out. You're going with Uncle Bernard to see him to-morrow and ask him to come to Fairmeads for Christmas Day, aren't you, Van?"

"Yes. I hope he's nice."

"I expect he is," put in Desmond. "He comes from Australia, doesn't he? Father was saying something about his never expecting to inherit Marsdale. I don't know the whole story, but he's only the son of old Mr. Marsdale's daughter. He had a cousin who was the son of a son, but he died or something."

"Rather thrilling to suddenly find yourself heir to a lovely old place like that," muttered August. "Bit like you, Lyntie?"

"Hmm," agreed Lyntie. "I only hope this Mr. Mortimer is as nice as we are, don't you, Van?"

The morning passed all too quickly for the busy shoppers, but none of them was late for lunch. Dakers had booked a large

table for them, and soon the attentive waiters were plying them with well-filled dishes of hors-d'œuvres. .

"'Ow on earth do you eat this stuff?" muttered Sid Scroggins, viewing the selection of knives, forks and spoons laid for his use. "I never knew as 'ow they gave the nobs beetroot and sardines mucked up with custardy macaroni and little green onions."

"Those aren't onions, Sid," Lyntie told him. "They're olives. You've heard of olive oil, haven't you?"

"What they uses for frying fish," said Sid quickly. "Course I 'ave. My mum likes a nice bit of fried fish. But I never knew you ate the oil in balls. I wish Grandad would tell me things. It's 'orrid bein' so ignorant."

"Gosh, *you* aren't ignorant!" burst out August loyally. "You can often give all of us points. I'd like to know half as much about London as you do."

Sid brightened visibly.

"That's different," he declared. "I suppose it's just what you're used to. I don't know nothing about posh grub, but I bet none of the kids down our street 'ave less flies on 'em than me."

"How have you all got on with your shopping?" asked Vanessa, who was rather embarrassed by Sid's outspokenness. "By the piles of parcels you all brought in, I should think you must have nearly finished."

"Please, Miss Vanessa, I want you to help me choose something for Miss Cynthia," piped up Tilly. "It's so hard to find anything that's of use to someone who's lying on her back all the time."

Before Vanessa could answer, August broke in.

"I've spent all my money, save sixpence," he stated ruefully. "How are you fixed, Spring?"

"Not very much better," Aprille answered, "save that I've kept ten bob for a scarf for Mummy, and something for you. If Desmond is as badly off as you, dear brother, you boys had better finish your shopping at Woolworth's."

"We've got to go there, too, to get things for the Christmas tree," burst out Lyntie. "They have lametta and lovely shiny balls and frosted cones. I've a special pound from Uncle for decorations. Where do you think we'll get the candles, Van? I want all white ones."

"Berkshire's, I should think. They've lots of jolly decorations, too. I vote we all meet there in the basement at four o'clock. Then we can choose the decorations before going upstairs for tea."

"Wizard prang!" cried August warmly. "They've a smashing native band up there this week. We saw it advertised when we went in this morning. It's a Prince somebody, and they've a tom-tom, a thing called a maraca, and a kind of native rattle. The Prince plays a drum made from an elephant's foot. It sounds super."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Sid. "We *are* doing things to-day, what with the motor ride and this posh meal and then a real live prince. But I bet they won't believe me when I tells 'em about it back 'ome," he added sadly.

"I think you can get post cards of the band," August told him. "If so, we'll get one for you, and that'll be proof."

"Has everyone finished, or are you having coffee, Van?" asked Lyntie. "I still have heaps to do, and you know we've arranged for Dakers to pick us up at Berkshire's at five."

"If you don't want coffee, you can go, Lyn," Vanessa said, smiling. "Tilly will wait for me."

Soon Lyntie and Aprille were hurrying off to Jaeger's for the bedsocks and scarf they wanted. It had begun to snow again, and the pavements were wet and slippery.

"Isn't snow beastly in towns?" said Lyntie. "I hate this dirty slushy stuff. It's so different in the country, where it stays white and is dry and powdery for days."

"It's cold everywhere," declared Aprille with a shiver. "I like the summer and the sun. For me the winter is just a season to be got through."

"Oh, but don't you love roaring log fires, and crumpets for tea, and cosy dark evenings indoors, and parties, and Christmas?"

"Of course I do, but I love picnics and swimming and tennis and moonlight adventures even more," Aprille laughed.

"Well, there's nothing to stop moonlight adventures in the winter," Lyntie pointed out. "What about tobogganing on the Downs over near Marsdale when it's full moon? I'm game, and I know the boys would love it. If it's a night spree, the Bardon Wines could come too."

"Sounds pretty good," agreed Aprille. "Can we take hot water bottles and Thermos flasks of hot coffee?"

"You can, but you'll not need 'em," chuckled Lyntie. "You'll be as warm as toast after you've dragged your sled up the run a few times. Here's Jaeger's. Let's drive in and try to get what we want quickly. I've still quite a lot to do."

"So have I. There's that plaguey brother of mine to be thought of, and I've still a few cards to get. Sally Sudweeks' are such sentimental creations that I don't want to rely on her for any last-minute ones I may need."

"Village shops certainly have their advantages and disadvantages," agreed Lyntie, as she pushed open the door and wended her way into the shop.

Fortunately there was an assistant free, and Lyntie soon chose her present. Aprille was not so quick. She found it difficult to decide between an artistic grey-and-blue scarf and a charming one in soft greens.

"What's your mother's favourite colour?" asked Lyntie.

"Blue and green," Aprille answered promptly. "She likes them equally."

"Then have the blue. It's perfect."

Still far from certain of her choice, Aprille agreed, and a few minutes later the two girls were once more outside in the snow.

"Where do we go from 'ere?" Lyntie sang in a questioning whisper.

"August is the next on my list. What have you to do?"

"Desmond, the Bardon twins, and Sally Sudweeks. Then there's Hydrotite and Mr. Jefferson. I'd like a nice calendar for Miss Ticehurst, too, and then there's Farmer and Mrs. Thatcher. I should think they'd like a big important-looking calendar as much as anything. And I mustn't forget the newcomer. St. Bernard would be terribly upset if one of his guests was left out. I looked for something suitable this morning, but saw nothing just right. Do you think we have time to go and see that nice blind Mr. Vennal who carves the lovely animals? We're quite close to the Lanes."

"Oh, yes, do let's go," cried Aprille eagerly. "He solved our problems once before, and he may again. If he had a lion,

I think August would love it. His zodiacal sign is Leo the Lion."

"Splendid idea. Perhaps I'll find something for Mr. Mortimer there. It's jolly awkward buying something for someone you have never met."

"It must be," agreed Aprille. "If you've enough money, why don't you buy something sensible and dull like writing-paper, and keep that in reserve? Then, if this Mr. Mortimer is a pompous ~~ass~~, you could take away the jolly present and substitute the paper."

"What it is to have brains! Here's the first twitten. Let's cut through quickly and choose our animals; if Mr. Vennal has any left, that is. Let's hope Miss Lethbridge hasn't cleared the place. I think she's the Vennals' main source of income. Here we are, and there's Mr. Vennal himself in the shop. I expect Mrs. Vennal is busy with Christmas preparations."

The blind craftsman welcomed them warmly, but admitted that his stock was very low.

"The few dogs left are all on the shelf under the cuckoo clock, and there are only a few paper-knives in the bowl. What were you wanting?"

Lyntie's only answer was a wild whoop of delight.

"You've got it, the very thing, Mr. Vennal," she shrieked. "I want something for someone I know nothing about save that he's from Australia, and here you have a lovely little kangaroo all ready for me. It's a letter-weight, too, which is more useful than just a carving. I mean, Mr. Mortimer mayn't like carved animals as much as we do, but he can't help loving this wallaby."

"I'm so glad you've found something," said the wood carver. "I love that kangaroo, too. I just thought I'd like to try to make one, and I feel it's turned out rather well. Now, what about the other young lady? I suppose trick boxes wouldn't interest you?"

"Trick boxes? What are they?" questioned Aprille, intrigued.

"Here's one," said Mr. Vennal, feeling carefully along a shelf behind him. "Now you try and open it."

Aprille took the beautifully carved little box and examined it carefully. Then she pulled and pushed it gently this way and that, but nothing happened.

"Do let me try," begged Lyntie. "I think you ought to try pressing the flowers."

Smiling, Mr. Vennal handed her a second box, and for some time the girls tried hard to open them. Finally, Aprille gave it up, and a few minutes later Lyntie followed suit.

"Please show us, Mr. Vennal," begged Aprille.

Taking the box, the craftsman quietly pressed a strip of wood, and it slid along about half an inch. Immediately the lid lifted effortlessly.

"How absolutely super!" cried Lyntie delightedly. "There, I've done it now. It's easy when once you know the way. Oh, I think I must get one for Desmond. He'll love it. How much are they, Mr. Vennal?"

"Five shillings."

"Then I'll have one, too, please. It'll be a novelty for August," said Aprille. "What luck we came here first! We'd never have found anything half as nice for the boys elsewhere."

"And I'm glad I had something for you," said Mr. Vennal heartily.

Lyntie chose a few other small things, and then the girls hurried off.

"I've nothing for the Fellowes' maid, and you said you were giving her something, Lyntie. Any ideas?"

"I believe she yearns for a rubber hot-water bottle," Lyntie answered. "I'd half thought of giving her that. Good old Hydrotite oughtn't to be allowed to stay awake with cold feet."

Aprille chuckled.

"Can you imagine the doughty Mackintosh not coping with anything? I'm sure she sleeps as she does everything else—well. But I think a rubber bottle's a fine idea. They've some super ones at the big Boots', and plush covers with little hoods to fit them. May I give the cover?"

"Rather! Boots'll be just the place for me to find torches for the Bardon twins. Ever since August had his Ever Ready, Mark and Frank have longed for similar ones."

When they left Boots', Aprille had threepence left, and she decided to spend that on two boxes of "frost" for their Christmas tree.



"It looks so pretty on the branches," she declared, "and I may as well go home penniless."

"Better short of pence than short of sense," Lyntie told her. "Here's good old G.B.W. Golly, what a scrum!"

They fought their way to the counter where the Christmas cards and calendars were piled high, and suddenly Aprille caught sight of Desmond.

"Look, Lyn, there are the boys. Hi, you three, finished your shopping?"

"Just about. Our money's all gone, anyway," August answered. "But we've seen someone you haven't."

"Whom?" asked Lyntie.

"A youngish man, dark and bronzed and clean-shaven. Looks interesting and a sport."

Lyntie frowned, and then she looked straight at August.

"Not—not Mr. Mortimer?" she asked.

"Right first time," grinned Desmond. "I told you she'd guess, August."

"But how did you know him?" questioned Aprille.

"Heard him give his address to the salesman in Berkshire's. He was buying carpets or something."

"Carpets!" exclaimed Lyntie in surprise. "But I thought Marsdale Manor was furnished."

"It is," Desmond told her, "but perhaps our Aussie doesn't approve. It mayn't have been carpets, either. August's only guessing. We just saw a big roll and heard the man give his name and address as Mortimer, Marsdale Manor."

"Wish I'd been there," sighed Lyntie. "Why do I always miss all the thrills?"

So eager were they discussing the newcomer, that none of them noticed a shabby fellow standing close behind them. But the man in the dirty raincoat noticed *them*, and he drank in every detail of their excited conversation.

Chapter II

MIRTH MAKES THE BANQUET SWEET

I can hardly believe it's Christmas Day to-morrow," said Lyntie, as she and Vanessa were putting the finishing touches to the huge Christmas tree standing in the darkest corner of the big ballroom. "It's been so long coming, and now it's suddenly here."

"I think I know what you mean," Vanessa answered quietly. "It's going to be a different Christmas from last year, Lyn, isn't it?"

"Rather! But I used to enjoy our tiny tree in its little pot," declared Lyntie loyally. "Little things gave us heaps of pleasure in those days. Not that I'm blasé, of course, but not having to save for weeks to buy a present does make the giving less of a sacrifice."

"I'm glad you feel like that. I was afraid all this luxury might spoil you. Uncle Bernard does indulge you terribly."

"Now don't go getting all schoolmistressy, Van," teased Lyntie. "I have to kowtow to Miss Dimsdale in term time, but I'm certainly not going to do it in the holidays. Is it fun being a mistress at Heronscourt?" she added curiously.

"I love it. Even the members of the Lower Fifth can't spoil it for me. I can honestly say I prefer you and your crowd to little Eric."

Lyntie giggled.

"I'd almost forgotten that spoilt brat. Wasn't I glad when Mrs. Audleigh sacked you for daring to reprimand her precious pet! Gosh, Van, if ever I'm in danger of growing spoilt just say Little Eric, and I'll change my whole character in an instant."

They both laughed.

"You've been through the mill, my dear, too much to forget," said Vanessa gently. "I'm not really afraid for you. There, do you think that's enough lametta?"

"I think so. One doesn't want to smother the green completely. Where's Val?"

"Gone to the Fellowes' with our presents. Uncle was going to

send some wine for Mrs. Fellowes by Dakers, but Val begged to be allowed to take it. She said she wanted a walk, and she probably did, but I think she really went because she felt we'd like to be alone with the tree for a bit."

"Decent of her. I'm glad for your sake she's here, Van. It'll be nice for Mr. Mortimer, too, if he's not the only outsider at the Christmas dinner to-morrow. Of course, the whole gang will be here in the evening for the tree. I think it's a super idea, and they'll all be so thrilled with their extra presents. Do you miss Miss Cardew, Van? I do."

"Of course I do, though less than you, Lyn, because I saw less of her. We must be glad she had a little time of great happiness before that fatal chill. She was growing old, you know, and her rather hard life had aged her beyond her years."

"I don't think she minded dying, because she knew we were all provided for. I think Primmy misses her most. Having been Mummy's governess, she was a very real link with Primmy's adored Miss Angel."

"I'm sure you're right, Lyn. Mrs. Mason feels everything connected with Fairmeads as keenly as her husband."

"Daybreak's a pet. I've bought him a lovely pair of slippers for Christmas. Sid pinched me one of his grandfather's so that I could get the right size and kind."

"Jolly nice. I love presents, and this is the first year we've been able to give really decent ones. Hark, wasn't that the front door? Who on earth can be calling so late on Christmas Eve?"

"Father Christmas, my sweet, complete with reindeer. Have we any moss for the poor creatures?"

"Shut up and listen. Heavens! Mason's coming here. It must be someone for one of us."

Before Lyntie could answer, the butler had entered the room.

"Mr. Jefferson and another gentleman to see you and Miss Lyntie, Miss Vanessa."

"Mr. Jefferson!" Vanessa sounded as surprised as she felt. "Is Sir Bernard in his study, Mason?"

"Yes, miss, and he doesn't wish to be disturbed."

"Then show Mr. Jefferson into the lounge. There's still a good fire there. Lyntie, help me to get the frost out of my hair."

"Why worry?" laughed Lyntie. "Silver hair enhances your beauty, and I don't suppose Mr. Jefferson will mind. Artists only notice beauty, and you look rather exciting. Come on, let's go and see what they want. I'm sure Mr. Jefferson hasn't come all the way from Thistle End to wish us a happy Christmas."

When the sisters entered the lounge, they found Mr. Jefferson thawing his feet at the fire. Near him stood a young fellow with a huge bundle.

"Ah, here you are," said the artist, swinging round. "This is my nephew, Antony Jefferson. I hope we haven't disturbed you, but I couldn't keep the dратted thing in my house a moment longer, and so I thought I'd give it to Lyntie for Christmas."

"A present for me?" cried Lyntie excitedly. "Whatever is it?"

"This," said Antony Jefferson with a grin, and he handed the huge bundle to Lyntie.

Bewildered, she began to unwrap the dark covering, which looked like a piece of a heavy curtain, and a moment later a large cage was revealed. In the cage sat a parrot.

"Gor blimey, you're a slubberdegullion," squawked the bird. "Not time for bed, not time for bed. You're a ruddy cheat, a ruddy cheat."

Lyntie listened enchanted. Vanessa, meeting the young man's eye, flushed, and Mr. Jefferson roared with laughter.

"Don't look so surprised, Tony," he bellowed. "It's amusing now it's not in my house. Like your present, Lyntie?"

"It's simply terrific," Lyntie declared fervently. "What's his name, please, Mr. Jefferson?"

"Rep. Short for Reprobate," grinned the younger man. "And hadn't you better call me Tony? Otherwise no one will know if you are talking to me or to my uncle."

"Of course. I'll call you what you like," Lyntie promised easily. "Are you here for long?"

"I don't know yet. You see——"

"He wants to stay, I've no doubt," cut in Wilfred Jefferson, "but he's afraid I'll kick him out after the holiday. But now that awful bird's found another home, I might put up with Tony for longer. He's been abroad so long I'd forgotten his existence, but he's got a good long leave now, and he thinks I'm the most likely relative to spend it with. Wait till he's seen some of Eversley's

most famous exhibits like P.C. Chubb and Sally Sudweeks, and perhaps he'll change his mind."

"I'm sure he won't," burst out Lyntie indignantly. "Chubb may be a lethargic snail—that's what we Octocats call him—but he has a heart of gold, whereas Sally's just Sally."

"Who or what are the Octocats?" asked Antony Jefferson.

"It's the name we gave to a detection society eight of us formed when St. Bernard was lost. We found him, too. No, Van isn't an Octocat. She's a highly respectable schoolmarm, though I'll own she doesn't look it with all that silver stuff in her hair and that chunk of cotton wool over her left ear."

"Cotton wool!" exclaimed Vanessa, dashing to look in the mirror. "Lyn, you wretch, I haven't any cotton wool on my head."

"That frosty effect's rather charming with your fair hair," mused Wilfred Jefferson. "I'd like to paint you like that in the moonlight. Sort of Blessed Damosel effect. Can't think why I never thought of it before. Will you sit for me sometimes after the holiday?"

"If you like, Mr. Jefferson, but hardly all messy like this. We were just doing the Christmas tree when you came, and—"

"Where's Rep's supper, you top-gallant picaroons? Hands up or I'll shoot. Ham and eggs, ham and eggs, ham and eggs."

"Cover him up, Lyntie," suggested Tony. "He's only quiet when he's in the dark. Sure you don't mind owning him?"

"Mind! He's quite my nicest possession. We'll have to make him an honorary Octocat."

"Cats! Bah!" shrieked the parrot. "Rep wants ham and eggs, ham and eggs, ham and—"

The last "eggs" was drowned by the folds of material Tony Jefferson flung over the cage in desperation.

"Come, Uncle," he advised, "or you'll be having to carry your parrot back again."

"I shan't let him go now," laughed Lyntie. "I must learn how to feed him and look after him, and then I'll teach him to sing 'God Save the King', and say things like 'Bless St. Bernard'."

"I'm not so sure that I'm grateful to you, Mr. Jefferson," joked Vanessa. "Rep's going to prove a handful, I fear. Are you both coming to the tree to-morrow night?"

"I was," declared the artist, "and if you'll have Tony I'll bring

him along with me. We won't stay now and wish Sir Bernard a happy Christmas. Please do it for us, will you?"

"Rather," cried Lyntie, "and thank you both a million times for Rep. The rest of the gang will be green with envy when they see him. I hope you'll like your presents half as much when you open them under the Christmas tree."

"I like Tony Jefferson, don't you, Van?" asked Lyntie when the sisters were alone again.

"I hardly know," Vanessa temporised. "I should definitely have said yes if he hadn't been responsible for Rep. I don't know what Uncle Bernard will say to that creature's language."

"He'll be fascinated," Lyntie said decidedly. "Rep will supply Fairmeads with the one thing it lacks—the element of the unexpected."

"Where are you going to keep the bird, Lyn?"

"I hardly know. In my schoolroom, I think. That's my special domain, and he's my special pet. I wonder how Tory will like him. I sincerely hope they'll be friends."

"They won't if Rep often says 'Cats! Bah!' as he did to-night," laughed Vanessa. "You'll have to be careful not to let Tory think he's no longer first in your affections."

"As though I should!" cried Lyntie hotly. "Why, Tory came with us all the way from Storm Cottage, and he always sleeps in my room. He keeps it free from mice, and that's more than Rep will ever do, though he might scare off burglars. I must try to train him to say the right things at the right moment. Van, do you think Mr. Mortimer will bring me a present when he comes to-morrow, and do you think it will be a Koala bear?"

"Of course not. Why ever should he?"

"No reason at all. But then, there was no reason why Mr. Jefferson and Tony should give me Rep."

"I should say that there was a reason, and a very good one. Mr. Jefferson has the mind of an artist, and he loves all things to be beautiful, even language."

"Gosh, Van, you are quaint. Tell me again, is Mr. Mortimer nice? I think it was horrid of St. Bernard not to take me too when you paid your state call. Even the boys have seen him, and I've had to wait simply ages for a first glimpse."

"I don't think you'll be disappointed. He's good, and good

things are worth waiting for. It's cosy here by the fire. Shall we finish off the Christmas tree in the morning? It's almost done, and it won't take long to put the presents underneath. They are only small things, because we shall all have had our real gifts earlier."

"I shan't put Rep under the tree, though I shall take him in to share the fun. I wonder if he's ever seen a decorated tree before."

"I shouldn't think so. Perhaps he'll die of shock. That would be the best solution for everyone," Vanessa teased.

"You're a beast," stormed Lyntie, grabbing the parrot's cage and going to the door. "I shall take my feathered friend upstairs, where he'll be properly appreciated. Then I think I shall go to bed. If I do, to-morrow will be here all the sooner. I wonder if it's still snowing. The moon's lovely. It'll be full on Friday, won't it?"

"I should imagine so. It's very bright to-night."

"I think I'll leave Rep here while I say good night to St. Bernard, then I can collect my lovely present on my way upstairs."

It was obvious from the moment they met that Lyntie and Charles Mortimer liked each other. In fact, everyone at Fairmeads liked Charles Mortimer, and before the flaming Christmas pudding was brought in, the Australian might have been one of the family. He talked easily and well, and his attractive bronzed face fascinated Lyntie. When he smiled, his brown eyes danced and his whole face lit up.

"Australia must be a wonderful country, Mr. Mortimer," she declared, when he had told them a particularly interesting story. "I'd love to go there."

"Perhaps you will some day. Frankly, I hated leaving it, though I'm finding England jollier and more friendly than I expected. I imagined a lonely Christmas far from my own place, and instead, I'm here with the kindest people on earth."

"Glad to hear you say that, my boy," said Sir Bernard warmly. "Christmas should be the happiest time of the year, but it can be the saddest. I, thank God, am blessed with two good great-nieces to cheer my declining years, to say nothing of the latest inmate of Fairmeads—a particularly talkative parrot."

"Have you a parrot, sir? I like 'em. They're jolly birds. Good talkers are great fun. They're so unexpected."

"This one is," gurgled Lyntie. "He's mine. I haven't had him a day yet, and already he's made one of the maids upset two cans of hot water all down the stairs, caused Daybreak—that's Mason, our butler—to so far forget his dignity as to run, and screech'd so convincingly that Primmy—that's Mrs. Mason—thought burglars had broken in in the early hours. You see, I awoke very early and uncovered him. I wonder what he'll say when I bring him down to see the Christmas tree this evening. I know Desmond and Aprille and August will fall for him. He'll be a great addition to our detection society."

"Detection society?" Charles Mortimer sounded suitably impressed. "I shall have to mind my p's and q's with detectives on my doorstep. How many of you are there?"

"Eight active members; that's why we called ourselves the Octocats. Then there's Cynthia Fellowes; she's an invalid and can't join in our adventures, but she's awfully clever, and so we made her an honorary member. She helped us to find St. Bernard when we lost him."

"Lost St. Bernard!" murmured the colonial. "I didn't know you had a dog. Did you find him?"

"St. Bernard is my uncle," chuckled Lyntie, and she hastily told her new friend about Sir Bernard's disappearance. "Vanessa and I arrived at Fairmeads to find him missing. But we Octocats got together and tracked him down. Hiding in the girls' school, he was, like an escaped convict. More exciting really if he had been one, instead of a respectable retireling."

Story followed story, and the day slipped away far too quickly for everyone. Almost before it seemed possible, the front door was being repeatedly opened to admit the visitors to the Christmas-tree party. The Rector and his wife, with Desmond, complete with trick box, were first to arrive.

"Hullo, Des, got your box open?" asked Lyntie, laughing.

"No, though I've an idea you push a bit of wood somewhere. Hasn't your uncle a box something like this? I think I remember you telling us about it."

Lyntie frowned for a moment; then her face cleared. "Of course he has, but I had quite forgotten it. I've only seen it once, ages

ago, and Daybreak opened it then. I'm afraid I was too much excited at the time to notice how he did it. But St. Bernard's has a key, and these haven't. Look! Press just there—it's a bit stiff—and—hey presto!"

"Pretty smart," declared Desmond. "I wonder if August has managed to find the secret."

"Aprille will have shown him, if not," Lyntie declared. "Ah! Here come the Jeffersons. You'll like Tony, Des."

Very soon after, Aprille and August, with their parents, turned up, and almost on their heels came Inspector Pentland.

"How extraordinarily nice of you to come to our tree party, Inspector!" cried Lyntie, though she was really wondering where to find a present for this uninvited guest. Then she thought of the writing-paper Aprille had advised her to buy, and her face cleared.

"I haven't exactly come to your party. I'm afraid my call is more or less official. There's been a big burglary ten miles the other side of Marsdale, and I thought you and Mr. Mortimer ought to be warned. Christmas is a good time for burglars, because often people have parties and dances, and a strange figure isn't so noticeable. The ladies wear their jewels too, and—"

"We haven't got any," broke in Lyntie. "At least, I have a string of pearls that St. Bernard gave me this morning, but I'm wearing those, and I shall have to be dead before anyone can steal them."

"'Twas good of you to come, Pentland," said Sir Bernard. "We're grateful for your warning. Now that you're here, you must have a drink and smoke, and a bit of fun. We may be glad of a police officer, too, if Rep does anything criminal."

"Of course he won't. He's waiting to come down and see the tree with the rest of you. I'll fetch him."

At the same time, Lyntie found the parcel of stationery, and brought it down to slip surreptitiously under the Christmas tree with the other parcels.

Mason had lit the hundred and fifty candles, and the shining silver and green almost took away the breath of the guests.

"It's perfect," breathed the Rector, and Mrs. Halliday nodded agreement.

"It's the first time I've seen a really artistic Christmas tree," said Wilfred Jefferson, his eyes half closed, as he drank in the beauty. "Most people put balloons and toys and coloured ornaments on the branches, and although gay, real beauty is missing."

"Primmy wanted us to have a fairy at the top," Lyntie told them. "But Van insisted on the silver star. It is nice, isn't it?"

"So beautiful that it's taken away my appetite," muttered August.

The laugh that followed this remark broke the spell for everyone save Wilfred Jefferson. He still stood gazing at the shining tree against the dark oak panelling. Then his eyes searched the room till they found Vanessa.

"If only I could paint it, with you lighting the last candle, Van," he began. "You with your fair hair shining with silver, as it did last night. May I try?"

"If you can find more white candles," said Vanessa lightly. "These are all we could get, and they won't burn long."

At this moment, Rep decided that the tree had had enough attention, and he lifted up his voice and chanted:

"Tick-tock-bell,
Pussy in a well!
Pussy'd rather be
Sitting in the tree
Along o' me."

"Where is 'Tory?'" asked Desmond, directly he could make himself heard. "Is he not here?"

"I don't think so, though Uncle Bernard allows him the run of the house now."

"Who are you?" suddenly squawked the parrot, fixing the Rector with a glittering eye. "I don't care a hoot-in-hell."

"Rep, be quiet," ordered Lyntie; then, seeing that Mr. Halliday was laughing, she joined in. "He's a ship's bird," she explained, "and has learned much from the sailors that he'll have to unlearn."

"Shan't," squawked the parrot, leering at Charles Mortimer. "The crew must hang together. Hands up or I'll shoot. Where are the police? Rep likes policemen."

"That's a good thing," grinned the Inspector. "Or perhaps Rep only likes those in uniform."

"Uniform," repeated the bird, "King's uniform. The old boy's drunk. Put him in the long boat till he gets sober. Give me a whisky and soda.

"Whisky and soda,
Eggs and ham;
Feed me well
And I'll not care a damn."

"Take that bird away, Lyntie," ordered Sir Bernard. "I object to having my friends sworn at and being told I'm drunk. You ought to be ashamed, Jefferson, of introducing such profanity into my household."

Lyntie was just picking up the cage, when Mason—who had brought in a tray of drinks—came forward.

"Shall I take the—er—bird, Miss Lyntie?" he asked. "I will send Sid up to feed him, if you wish."

"Thanks, Daybreak, but I think I'd better see to him. He doesn't know Sid yet, and everything here must still be awfully strange. I'll put him to bed to-night."

"Not time for bed, not time for bed," shrieked the parrot. "Gor blimey, you're a ruddy cheat."

Half laughing, Lyntie fled from the room, dragging the screeching bird with her. She was some time gone, and when she returned, Vanessa had already begun to distribute the silver-wrapped packages under the tree.

"Hurry up, Lyn, or you'll miss all the fun," cried Desmond.

"Have you been feeding Rep all this time?" questioned August. "We've all been dying to open our tree presents."

"Sorry I was so long, but I couldn't help it," apologised Lyntie. "Tell you why afterwards," she added in an undertone to Desmond. "Isn't it fun having an extra present when Christmas is nearly over? I wonder what mine is."

"Open it and see," advised the Rector. "I'm going to; I love surprises."

Soon only the crackling of paper filled the room, as fifteen people eagerly untied silver tinsel-ribbon, and pulled off wrappings.

"Gee-whiz!" exclaimed Desmond delightedly. "A propelling pencil! Just what I longed for. Thank you, Sir Bernard and Van and Lyn."

"I'm lucky, too," cried Mrs. Pennrose-Eyre. "My box contains hankies, and I'm terribly short of them. I seem to lose so many."

"I don't lose mine," teased Mrs. Halliday, "but they're just worn out. It's years since I bought any, so these lovely ones will be particularly welcome. Thank you, Fairmeads."

"Somebody knows my weakness," laughed the Doctor, as he drew out a jar of old-fashioned humbugs. "Nothing like a humbug to warm you on a cold night. I've another present, too, a loose-leaf notebook—most useful. Many thanks, St. Nicholas."

"I fear my forgetfulness is more apparent than I thought," said the Rector. "An engagement block *and* a diary. I promise to use both, Santa Claus, and to try to keep all my appointments punctually in the New Year."

Laughter greeted this sally, and during it, several more parcels were undone. Charles Mortimer was charmed with his kangaroo, and Valerie was equally delighted with a handy powder compact. Aprille's packet contained a much-longed-for autograph album, and August was thrilled with a well-filled box of sweets. Inspector Pentland's writing-paper was a great success, and no one was as surprised as he was to receive a present.

"I'm only a gatecrasher," he declared, "and oughtn't to have had this. But I'm delighted with it, and offer my most grateful thanks to the givers."

Vanessa's parcel contained hand cream, and Wilfred Jefferson's a Year-at-a-View calendar. Sir Bernard found a wooden string-box in his. It was shaped like a bear hugging a staff, and only Lyntie really knew why he laughed so heartily at the novelty. Their eyes met, and for a moment they twinkled at each other.

"Aren't you going to open your surprise, Lyn?" asked Aprille. "It's not like you to be the last."

"I won't be," cried Lyntie, rousing herself. "I'll beat Tony to it, or die in the attempt."

And she just managed it, for Tony Jefferson's parcel was small and fiddling to unfasten.

"Mine's a darling little pocket manicure," cried Lyntie. "Shades of Miss Dimsdale, I can see. My nails shall be irreproachable next term, mistress mine. But I do love it, and thanks a million, both of you."

"And surely mine's the nicest present of the lot," declared Tony Jefferson, as he extracted a tiny black cat charm from layers of cotton wool. "I can do with a bit of luck."

"Glad you like it," burst out Lyntie impulsively. "Because it's not a proper present. We didn't know about you in time, you see, and somehow I couldn't imagine you writing letters as I can Inspector Pentland. If you were a good correspondent, you wouldn't have been such a shock to your uncle. Now let's put on the lights, blow out the candles, and dance."

It was some time later, when Lyntie and Desmond were dancing together, that she dragged him outside.

"Listen, Des," she began. "Can we get away for a bit? I want to explore the grounds."

"What on earth for?"

"Because when I put Rep to bed, I saw someone out there. It was a man, and he was creeping along the lower terrace."

"Why on earth didn't you say something? The Inspector would have made short work of him."

"That's why," Lyntie answered ambiguously. "I can't explain, but there was something about the man that made me unwilling to drag in the police. Besides, I thought it might be a lovely adventure for the Octocats. We're all eager for another mystery, aren't we?"

"Rather!" agreed Desmond warmly. "Let's slip on our coats and outdoor shoes, and take a look round."

Five minutes later, Lyntie and Desmond stood on the lower terrace, gazing at strange footprints already half hidden by the falling snow.

Chapter III

HE THAT MISCHIÉF HATCHETH, MISCHIEF CATCHETH

“What do you make of it?” asked Lyntie, looking at Desmond.

“Obviously somebody’s been here. Let’s follow the tracks, and see where they go.”

Eagerly Lyntie assented, and the two of them walked off towards the side of the house.

“They seem to end here,” said Desmond, pausing. “See, here’s another lot of tracks coming from the other direction. Looks as though someone turned up unexpectedly, and frightened off your man.”

“That’s possible, unless they were confederates and met here,” put in Lyntie thoughtfully.

“In that case, where are they now? They’d hardly dive into the bushes to talk.”

“They might, if they thought they’d been seen,” suggested Lyntie. “Let’s look and see. Hark! I thought I heard a movement in there.”

“Get behind me and stay there,” ordered Desmond, realising the possibility of danger. “I’ll lead the way.”

But before either of them could leave the path, the bushes parted, and Sid Scroggins emerged.

“Sid!” gasped Lyntie. “What on earth are you doing, hiding in the bushes?”

“Grandma sent me off to bed at nine o’clock, even though ‘tis Christmas Day, and I thought I see somethin’ fishy out of the window, so I sneaked down to investigate.”

“What did you see, Sid?”

“A man, Mr. Desmond. Not a gentleman, but a snoopy sort o’ fellow, creeping along the terrace. I suppose I oughter ‘ave roused the ‘ouse, but being a Hoctocat I thought I’d act on me own.”

“Like me, Sid,” cried Lyntie. “I saw the man, too, and didn’t

say anything, except to Desmond. Did you see where the intruder went?"

"Over the wall, Miss Lyntie. I was as quiet as anything, but 'e must 'ave 'eard me. 'E was peerin' in at Sir Bernard's study, though 'e couldn't see much with the curtains drawn, but 'e suddenly turned and dived into the bushes. Later I thought I saw him scalin' the wall."

"Did you see his face?" Desmond asked.

"Not proper, I didn't. 'E'd pulled 'is 'at well down over 'is eyes, and turned up the collar of 'is raincoat, but 'e was tall and dark. Funny footprints, aren't they? Looks as though 'is right shoe was split across."

"Pretty easy to pick up if we want to," said Desmond easily. "But I don't think we can do much to-night. It's snowing hard, and Miss Lyntie oughtn't to be out here. Will you go back, Lyn, if Sid and I do a spot of investigating? It can't be much, because the parents are sure to leave early, and I'll be missed."

"Let me go," begged Sid. "I'm supposed to be asleep, and if Miss Lyntie'll lock my door when she goes up, and 'ide the key under my mat, no one can find out I'm missin'. I might track the fellow and find out where 'e's 'idin'."

"Probably came in a car," said Lyntie.

"Hardly, if his shoes are so split," Desmond pointed out. "All right, Sid, get cracking, and report to Miss Lyntie in the morning."

"O.K., boss."

Sid saluted smartly, and dived into the shrubbery.

"Coming, Lyn?" asked Desmond. "They'll be wondering where we've got to."

Lyntie nodded, and silently they retraced their steps.

"You wouldn't like to tell the Inspector, Lyn, would you?" Desmond questioned, thinking her silence might be due to anxiety.

"Of course not. Nothing more's likely to happen to-night, and now we've been warned, we're prepared. It may have been just a tramp looking for shelter. Isn't it lovely now that the snow's stopped, and the moon's come out? Des, are you game for a spot of moonlight tobogganing? If so, and it's fine, let's go to-morrow when the moon's almost full."

"Will your uncle let you?" asked Desmond. "It would be

terrific, but parents and people always seem to frown on fun at night."

"They needn't know. We'll make it an Octocats affair, and meet at the crossroads at eleven-thirty. We've done it before, without anyone knowing, and we'll go it again. You've a toboggan, haven't you?"

"I had, but it's in pretty poor shape now, and not too safe."

"Then you can share mine. Aprille and August have one, I know, and Mark and Frank will bring theirs, if Frank can get away. I wish he hadn't left your father, to work on Marsdale Farm. If not, Mark and Sid can share. In any case, Sid can ride with them, he's such a scrap. Will you tell Aprille and August, and I'll let Sid and Mark know?"

"All right, I'm game. Sid can help you take your toboggan to the crossroads, can't he? Then I'll take over. It will be fun. Shall we go to the Downs above Marsdale? They're the best for tobogganing."

"So I've heard. Yes, we'll go there. It's not more than five miles, if we don't keep to the road; and we're all good walkers. Gosh, these are going to be super holidays. Now there are the germs of a mystery, to add to everything else. Here we are, back again, and there doesn't seem to be anyone about. Change quickly, Des, and we'll rejoin the party. The radiogram's still playing."

"Thanks be," muttered Desmond, as he slipped off his raincoat.

When they re-entered the ballroom, everyone was dancing or talking, and no one seemed to take any notice of the truants. Only Charles Mortimer, who was standing by the radiogram, regarded them with interest.

"Been sitting it out?" he teased, when Lyntie joined him.

"Not exactly. We just thought we'd like a breath of fresh air. It's hot in here."

Charles Mortimer regarded her closely, but he said nothing further.

"Do you have Christmas trees in Australia, Mr. Mortimer?" she asked.

"Of course we do, only usually our Christmas celebrations are held out of doors at a picnic. We don't usually have our presents then, but first thing on Christmas morning."

"So ~~you we~~," Lyntie told him. "I had my pearls and Van's fitted writing case this morning, and Van had a lovely little motor-car from St. Bernard. The parcels to-night were only rifles for our guests. I think they were an innovation."

"A charming one. I love my wallaby. I wonder where you found him."

"At Mr. Vennal's. I'll take you there some time, if you like, and introduce you. He's blind, but he carves wonderfully. I haven't thanked you half enough yet for the charming carved bangle you gave me. It's so original. It's Maori, isn't it?"

"Yes; really it comes from New Zealand and not Australia, but I thought you wouldn't mind that."

"Rather not, Mr. Mortimer."

"Why not Charles? I shall be jealous if you call young Jefferson Tony; and me Mr. Mortimer."

Lyntie laughed.

"But you are a wealthy landowner of importance, whereas Tony is only a sailor."

"What's he got that I haven't?" teased Charles Mortimer. "If you don't call me Charles, I won't invite you to my house-warming party when I have it. I must get some more staff before then. Old Rudge and his wife may have been excellent caretakers, though I doubt it, but they can't keep and run the old place as I want it done."

"Get Van and Val to help you with staff, Charles," suggested Lyntie. "Val's pretty good at that sort of thing, I believe, because she's managed Nina Lethbridge's house for ages, and she is fussy. Like all famous people, she's spoilt. I'm going to be famous one day, you know."

"Indeed! Do you think your sister and her friend would help me? I feel rather helpless myself. I might manage to get a good agent and outside staff, but the indoor people would be quite beyond me."

"You'll have to marry, for the Manor's sake," teased Lyntie.

Not long after this, the Rector declared he must go, and Inspector Pentland, realising the time, also sprang to his feet.

"Anyone coming my way?" he asked. "Because I've got my car outside. Can I drop you and your family at the Rectory, Mrs. Halliday?"

"Oh, would you? That would be kind. After ~~so much~~ excitement and wine, I was rather dreading the walk home."

"Can I run you to the Manor, Mr. Mortimer?" asked Dr. Pennrose-Eyre. "My wife and the children can sit in the back, and you can have the seat next to me."

"And we'll have to walk, Tony, my boy," sighed Wilfred Jefferson. "Nobody wants us. I really think I'll have to buy a donkey cart of my own."

"Would you like my bike, Mr. Jefferson?" joked Lyntie. "Tony could have Van's, unless she'll lend you her new car."

"What, on a night like this, and us with no garage at the other end?" burst out Tony Jefferson. "We'll walk. It'll be good for Uncle. He sits far too much, and is growing fat. To-morrow I must measure him below the Plimsoll's mark."

Laughing and joking, the guests took their departure, and Lyntie was quite glad when she could go up to bed. Christmas was jolly, but it was very tiring, and to-morrow there would be little sleep for the tobogganing party. Although Lyntie was soon in bed, she did not go to sleep quickly. She kept thinking about those footprints, and the man peering in at the study windows. Would Sid discover anything? Ought they to have confided in Inspector Pentland? Wearily, Lyntie turned over. Then she sat up, listening. Had Sid returned? Perhaps Mason would notice that his special side door had been unbolted and would rebolt it. Slipping out of bed, Lyntie forced her feet into her slippers, and crossed to the window. There was no sign of life outside. Ought she to go down and examine the door? Perhaps Sid had returned and bolted it, and then if she slipped back the bolt, the door would be open all night. That was not a pleasant feeling with strangers about. Lyntie decided to go to Sid's room and see if the key was still under the mat. That would tell her whether the young detective was back in his room or not.

Donning her dark dressing-gown, Lyntie stole silently along the passage leading from her room to the servants' quarters. Once she thought she heard footsteps, and she dived into an empty room and waited, watching through a crack left by the door she had almost closed. But no one came, and in a few minutes she crept out and continued on her way.

"It's ~~gone~~," she muttered, feeling for the key. "That means he's back. What a relief!"

Quietly, but far more quickly, she sped back to her room and into her warm bed. This time she fell asleep almost at once, and knew nothing more till a smiling maid arrived with her early tea.

After breakfast, Lyntie went in search of Sid, and found him watching for her near the stables. He greeted her with a grin.

"I thought you was never coming, Miss Lyntie," he burst out. "I've been waitin' 'ere for hours."

"Sorry, Sid. I had a bad night, and slept late. How did you get on last night?"

"I tracked 'im 'alf-way to Thistle End, Miss Lyntie, and then I 'ad to 'ide, 'cause 'e met another chap, and stayed talkin'. When they parted, Splitshoe struck off down Parsley Lane to the Downs. The other man went off towards the Bardons' place. I think 'e must be lodgin' at one of the cottages in their lane, 'cause I saw 'im turn the corner, and when I got there, 'e'd disappeared."

"It certainly looks as though you've got something there, Sid. We'll question Mark. Did you see either of the men clearly?"

"Not your man, Miss Lyntie, but I got a glimpse of the other chap when 'e passed me. I'm sure I've seen 'im before somewhere, but I can't think where. P'raps I'll remember later. It may 'ave been in London, and if so, 'e's probably a wrong 'un."

"You didn't overhear anything the men were saying?"

"'Fraid not. I couldn't get near enough."

"All right, Sid. You've done jolly well. Like to come tobogganning with the Octocats to-night? Just a secret bit of sport over on the Downs near Marsdale. We're meeting at the crossroads at eleven-thirty, and you might bring the toboggan hanging in the end shed. Tell your grandfather I asked you to get it cleaned and in order, then you can give it the once-over. We don't want any accidents."

Sid's eyes shone.

"What a smashin' idea, Miss Lyntie! Trust me to be there. I'll 'ave your toboggan polished up a treat, and I'll wait outside the gate for you soon after eleven. You didn't ought to be walkin' about the country alone at night. Sir Bernard wouldn't like it."

"All right, Sid. You shall be my cavalier. Let's go and find Mark. I believe he's clearing snow round the back of the house."

Sid followed, beaming. He was not quite sure what Miss Lyntie meant, for he'd always thought a cavalier had long curls and a lace collar, but it sounded important, and the word would impress his cockney companions when he used it on his return home.

They found Mark, and Lyntie quickly told him about the proposed tobogganing party. He beamed.

"There's nothing I like better than a night adventure, Miss Lyntie," he assured her. "And tobogganing's a great sport. Frank's got to-day off till milking-time, and then he's staying the night at the farm, so he ought to be able to join us easy. Mr. Muzzle said as how I could go home at dinner-time and stay till to-morrow, so I'll fix things with Frank."

"That's fine. Don't forget your toboggan. By the way, Mark, do any of the cottagers in your lane let rooms?"

"Not that I know of, Miss Lyntie, but I'll ask Mum. If there's anyone strange about, she'd be sure to know it."

"Good. Don't forget, Mark. We think we're on to a fresh mystery, but I'll have to tell you to-night, because I can hear Mr. Muzzle coming. Skip, Sid. We don't want to look like conspirators."

Lyntie said good night shortly after ten that evening, and Valerie declared her intention of turning in early too.

"I'm horribly sleepy," she yawned. "I think it must be all your fresh air here. I'm always wide awake in Town."

"It's Christmas fare," teased Vanessa. "Plus the cocktails you like so much. Don't you agree, Uncle?"

"What was that—my dear? You want to go to bed? Then go. I shan't be late myself. Frivolity and parrots tire an old man like me. Good night, Lyntie, child. Sleep well."

"You too, St. Bernard, darling. 'Night, you two. See you at breakfast."

Before she went upstairs, Lyntie stole along to the ballroom. Anyone seeing her would merely think she had left something there, or wanted to have a last peep at the Christmas tree. But Lyntie never even glanced at the still lovely green-and-silver corner. She sped to the window next to the end, loosened the shutter, and unbolted it. Then she retraced her steps, locked the door behind her, and pocketed the key.

"Now, if burglars do get in, they can only ransack one room

and that ~~was~~ pretty empty one," she muttered. "No one's likely to go there again to-night."

Some time later, after she had had her bath, Lyntie stood before her wardrobe, pondering.

"Wish I had a proper ski-ing suit," she murmured. "Snow's so wet when it penetrates and thaws. I suppose my flannel bags with cycle-clips will be the best to wear."

Swiftly, Lyntie dragged on her garments, choosing an extra warm pullover and a woolly hood that came right down inside her coat collar. She looked for a moment at the new fur-backed gloves Valerie had given her for Christmas, but decided that they were far too good. Pulling open her glove drawer, she divpd inside and found a warm woollen pair.

"Now I'm ready for anything," she muttered. "What's ~~the~~ time? Only ten to eleven. Well, I suppose I'd better sit down and wait till the hall clock strikes, and then steal out. Perhaps it would be wiser to go now, though. Then I could nip out through Daybreak's door. He never locks it till he goes up at eleven. If I hurry, I'll just make it."

When Lyntie reached the entrance gates, everything was quiet and still, but as she hurried out into the road, Sid seemed to materialise from nowhere.

"I've polished up the toboggan a fair treat, Miss Lyntie," he said proudly. "It's going to be a lovely night."

"I'm sure it is, Sid. There's something exhilarating about snow when there's a moon. I hope the others will all be there waiting for us. Shall I give you a hand with the toboggan?"

"No, thank you. 'Tisn't 'eavy, and the snow's dry and scrunchy."

They hurried along for a few minutes in silence, then Lyntie asked:

"Remember yet where you've seen that man, Sid?"

"I'm almost sure it was near where I lives." Sid frowned. "'Bout three weeks ago, 'twould be. 'E came out of the pub at the end of our street, and I 'eard someone ask 'im if 'e'd enjoyed 'is 'oliday. 'E swore something awful, and said next time 'e'd do something to deserve it. Of course, I ain't quite certain, but I've a sort of feelin' I'm right."

Lyntie nodded thoughtfully. She was wondering what the men

were plotting, and against whom. Could her ~~uncle~~ be their quarry? He must have made many enemies in the past, and desperate men or ones who thought they'd been wronged would stop at nothing.

"I wonder if we ought to have left Fairmeads, Sid," she said suddenly. "If there were an attempted burglary there to-night, we could have been of use."

"True, Miss Lyntie, but why should it be to-night? In any case, the 'ousehold's been warne'. Sir Bernard told Grandad what the Inspector 'ad said. Mr. Muzzle's been told to keep a good look-out, too."

"Which he doesn't seem to be doing," mused Lyntie. "At least, ~~we~~ got out unobserved. Perhaps he's patrolling the walls. After ~~as~~ burglars aren't likely to use the front entrance. Ah, here are the others. Good! Are we late, Des? My watch only says twenty-five past, and it's usually pretty reliable."

"No, we were all early," Desmond told her. "April and August were here soon after eleven, and I turned up at a quarter past. It's a case of going while the going's good. Mark's only been here about two minutes, and Frank's meeting us up on the Downs beyond the farm. We'd best step out, or it'll be morning before we've had any fun. It's rather a good thing Tilly's at her aunt's till Monday, or she'd have slowed us up. Now, Sid, don't get up on your hind legs. We're not belittling your precious Tilly, merely stating facts. Here, give me that sledge, and go and give Mark a hand with his. It's a cumbersome one, but I wouldn't mind betting it's dashed comfortable."

"It is, Mr. Desmond," declared Mark. "You'll have to try it and see. Not knowing about to-night, Frank brought it home, to get it into order during the holiday. Shall we turn off before we reach the Manor and take the footpath to the Downs?"

"It's the quickest, so of course we'll go that way," burst out August. "My feet are as cold as charity, and I want to start tobogganing."

"So do we all," grinned Lyntie. "If you'd like to have a good run to get warmed up, I'll help Aprille with your sledge."

August grimaced, but did not deign to answer Lyntie. It was Aprille who broke the silence.

"We went round to the Fellowes' for Mummy this morning

and saw Cynthia. She wants to know if we'll all go to tea on Saturday."

"Oh, yes, let's. It'll be fine," Lyntie cried quickly. "Poor old Cynthia gets so little fun, and she'll be thrilled to hear about our mystery man. You've told them, Des?"

"No, I waited for you. There seemed nothing much to tell."

"Oh, isn't there? Sid saw him talking to an old lag last night, near Thistle End, and tracked the lag to the Bardons' lane. We think he must be lodging there."

"I asked Mum, Miss Lyntie," said Mark, "and she says Mrs. Cox has a lodger, but he's going to-morrow or next day, she thinks. A chap from London, who had a sudden longing to spend Christmas in the country."

"What on earth are you blethering about?" burst out Aug. 4.
"What man met the old lag, and in any case, why shouldn't he?"

"My man—Splitshoe," Lyntie explained, and she hastily told them all that happened the previous night.

By the time they had finished discussing the mysterious men, they were well up on the Downs.

"Do let's rest a minute now," begged Aprille. "It's almost like climbing the Himalayas."

Desmond hooted.

"It's obvious you've never seen a hill," he jibed, "let alone a mountain. Why, this is almost flat. Feeling cold?"

"No, thanks. If I look anything like I feel, I must be twin to a tomato. Have a toffee, anybody?"

Immediately, Aprille was surrounded, and soon a pleasant sucking sound filled the silence of the night.

"What millions of stars there are!" observed Lyntie, gazing heavenwards. "I think astronomy must be terribly fascinating. I wish we could take it for School Certificate instead of algebra or geometry. I loathe x's and angles."

"What about a bit of snowballin' before we tackle the last climb?" proposed Sid, scraping up a handful of snow and throwing it at Mark, who immediately dropped his toboggan and retaliated.

Soon all six were pelting each other, and their excited shrieks rent the air.

"Guess we've wasted long enough playing about," panted Desmond some time later. "Poor old Frank will have been waiting ages for us, and wondering what's happened. Let's get on quickly and have some real sport."

The others agreed, and by putting their best foot foremost, they topped the last rise twenty minutes later, and found Frank waiting for them.

"You are late," was his only greeting.

"Sorry, old chap," apologised Desmond. "These infants wanted to play at snowballs, and we forgot the time."

"Infant yourself," stormed August. "You shall have first run down to even things up a bit, Frank."

"Rather!" agreed Desmond. "Will you take Sid? He's small, and your toboggan is by far the biggest."

"Course we will," cried the twins heartily.

Soon, three toboggans were racing down the long slope, and then being laboriously dragged up to the top again.

"Isn't it simply gorgeous, Des?" cried Lyntie happily, as she pulled and plodded her way back up the track. "I vote we go to that higher peak this time, and run right down and round the bend. We've got the hang of it now, and so we aren't likely to tip over."

"I'm game," laughed Desmond. "But let's say nothing, and surprise the others."

Lyntie nodded gleefully, and they tramped on and on, right to the top. They could hear the shouts of the others, as they sailed down at an exhilarating speed.

"Wait half a jiffy till I get my breath," panted Lyntie, plumping heavily down on the sledge. "There, I'm ready now."

But Desmond did not answer. He was staring out over the snow to the north.

"What's up, Des?" questioned Lyntie, watching him curiously.

"Can you see something dark in the snow over there, Lyntie? What can it be?"

Lyntie sprang to her feet, and her eyes followed Desmond's pointing finger.

"We'd best go and see," she suggested. "Leave the toboggan here."

They tore off over the snow, eager to satisfy their curiosity and

return to their sport. A moment later they were both kneeling beside the half-buried figure of a man.

"Heavens!" breathed Desmond. "Who on earth can it be?"

"I don't know him," mused Lyntie. "Probably some poor down-and-out on the tramp. He looks pretty shabby."

"And thin," said Desmond pityingly. "He's collapsed from cold and hunger, I should think."

"Well, what shall we do?" asked Lyntie, frowning. "We can't leave him here."

"Rather not," agreed Desmond. "Which house is the nearest?"

"Marsdale Manor."

"Then we must take him there. We'll shout to the others to come up here. The Bardons' toboggan is the biggest. We must get the poor chap on to it, and drag him to the Manor. Mr. Mortimer can't mind, can he?"

"Rather not! Colonials are awfully understanding about things like this," Lyntie said quickly. "You hail the others, Des. Your voice carries better than mine."

Desmond went back to the place where they had left their sledge, and gave a peculiarly penetrating whistle. It was answered from below, and a few minutes later he saw five figures clambering up the run.

"Come up here, Twins," he shouted, "and bring your toboggan. We need your help."

The Bardons quickened their pace, and Aprille and August struggled on close behind.

"What's wrong, Mr. Desmond?" questioned Frank. "Nothing happened to Miss Lyntie?"

"No. She's all right. She's over there. We've found a man lying in the snow."

"A man!" cried Aprille, her eyes wide. "Is he hurt?"

"We don't know yet what's wrong. He's unconscious," Desmond told them, and he led the way to the spot where Lyntie was still kneeling, scraping away the snow from the still figure. She looked up as they approach.

"He's awfully cold, Desmond, but I think his heart's beating."

"Good work, Lyntie. Come, you boys, help to get him on to the sledge."

"Where are you going to take him, Mr. Desmond?" asked Frank.

"To the Manor. It's nearest," Desmond answered briefly.

"How shall we get him down the run?" questioned August. "There won't be room for anyone to sit in front and guide the toboggan."

"You'll have to walk three a side and act as human brakes," said Desmond. "I'll hang on at the back and drag as much as I can. We'll manage."

"Are you sure he hasn't broken anything?" cried Aprille anxiously. "We ought to make sure before we move him."

"His arms and legs are all right," Lyntie reported. "I think it's a case of collapse. Still, we'd better pad the toboggan with our coats. Dragging the sledge will keep us warm."

In less than half an hour, a weary band were trudging up the Manor drive, dragging their unconscious burden.

"Shall we ring the front-door bell?" asked Aprille rather apprehensively.

"Of course. Someone's bound to come if we ring long and loud enough," Lyntie assured her. "Probably it'll be Charles himself. I don't know why, but I rather think he's a light sleeper. Are the two toboggans at the back still tied on, Sid?"

"Yes, Miss Lyntie."

"Good. Then if you can manage, I'll run on and ring the bell." And Lyntie sped away to rouse the house.

Chapter IV

FOOLS GROW WITHOUT WATERING

When the others reached the front door, Lyntie was still ringing and knocking.

"Can't you make anyone hear?" demanded August.

"Not yet," Lyntie answered, keeping her finger on the bell. "Wait a minute, though; I think I hear footsteps. Listen!"

They all waited, straining their ears. There certainly was a sound of movement from within, and Lyntie took her finger off the bell. A moment later they were relieved to hear the bolts being drawn.

"Who's there?" asked Charles Mortimer's voice, and Lyntie sprang eagerly forward.

"It's us—the Octocats," she burst out. "We've found an unconscious man on the Downs, and we've brought him here. We think he's half starved, and has collapsed from hunger and cold."

"I should think *you'll* soon be in bed with pneumonia, Lyntie," was Charles Mortimer's only answer. "Where's your coat?"

"Over him. He's on the toboggan. May we bring him in?"

"Of course. Isn't that what you've roused me for? Let me look at the man and see what I think about him."

He pulled a torch out of his pocket, and flashed it on the stranger.

"Poor devil!" he muttered. "Help me to unwrap him, Des, and we'll carry him in. Fortunately there's been a big fire in the library all day, and I don't think it'll be quite out yet. Aprille, will you and Lyntie go in and build it up? It's the second door on the right."

The two girls hurried off as they were asked, secretly glad to get in out of the cold. Since they had been standing still, they had felt the lack of their coats.

"Oh, isn't it lovely and warm in here?" cried Aprille, as they entered the library. "And the fire's still in. Some of these bits of log will soon make a blaze."

Together they plied the dying fire, first with wood, and then with small pieces of coal.

"Does Mr. Mortimer live here all alone, Lyntie?" Aprille asked, surprised.

"I don't know. At least, I know he has a caretaker and his wife, a couple called Rudge—but they mayn't live in the house."

Aprille shivered.

"I suppose it's a fine old place, but I'd hate to live here alone. Do you think Mr. Mortimer likes England?"

"How should I know? What makes you ask?"

"I thought he spoke so longingly of Australia last night; and what are money and possessions worth, if you're lonely and miserable?"

"I hardly think Charles is miserable," declared Lyntie. "I like him, and I hope he'll marry and settle down here happily."

"Perhaps he'll fall in love with your sister."

"Don't talk rot," Lyntie said shortly. "Van's far too keen on her job. Here, Spring, help me to shove this couch round. They'll want to put that poor chap near the fire. Shall we try to find the kitchens and make some hot coffee?"

"It sounds marvellous!" Aprille agreed. "It's rather a rotten ending to our sport. I suppose it'll mean the end of our night adventures."

"Why?"

"Well, we can hardly keep to-night a secret, after this, can we?"

"I suppose not. I hadn't thought of that. Here they come. Hold back the door, Aprille."

Between them, Charles Mortimer and Desmond carried in the unconscious man and laid him gently on the couch.

"I'll try to get him to swallow a little brandy," said Mr. Mortimer, going to a cupboard in the corner.

He quickly found what he wanted, and came back to the fire. Pouring a little of the neat spirit into a small glass, he moistened the white lips of the stranger.

"I think he's coming to," whispered Desmond.

Charles Mortimer nodded.

"Here, the rest of you. Make yourselves scarce. Our friend won't want the lot of you round him when he recovers consciousness. You stay, Des, and you, Lyntie. The rest of you, scram."

"May we go to the kitchen and make some coffee?" asked Aprille. "We're feeling a bit chilly."

"Of course. Very good idea. Coffee will be excellent for our patient when he has recovered a little. Starved, that's what he is. I must rouse Rudge—he's rather deaf—and get him to find some dry clothes for the poor chap. No, on second thoughts, I won't. No need for more people to know how the fellow got here. Lyntie, will you go upstairs to the first front room along the corridor to the right? Bring down some warm pyjamas from the first long drawer, and something to serve for a dressing-gown. Since the Rudes haven't waked, they can sleep till morning."

At this moment the man opened his eyes and stared round him apprehensively. Instantly Lyntie was down on the floor beside him.

"Don't worry," she begged. "You're quite safe. We found you

on the Downs, and brought you here. Mr. Mortimer and Desmond will get you out of your wet things while I go up and get dry ones of Mr. Mortimer's for you."

"That's quite right," put in Charles Mortimer kindly. "Here, old chap, drink this. 'Twill do you good. Then you shall have some coffee and a chicken sandwich."

For a moment the stranger did not speak; then he said softly:

"You are *very* kind. I—I lost my way in the snow, and I was so cold and tired. It is warm here."

"Rather! And you'll be warmer still when you're dry," Desmond hastily assured him. "What's your name?"

"John Marsh," murmured the man, and he shut his eyes.

"Don't try to talk," said Charles Mortimer gently. "But if you can manage to sit up, we'll get off these wet clothes. That's the way, Des. Put the things into a heap. Mrs. Rudge can dry them in the morning, if they're worth it. Mr. Marsh shall have my bed for the rest of the night, unless he prefers to stay here by the fire. I think I can hear Lyntie coming. Go and get the things from her and ask her to bring us some coffee in here in ten minutes."

Desmond intercepted Lyntie in the hall and gave her Mr. Mortimer's message.

"His name's John Marsh," he whispered, "and I think he's down and out."

"Perhaps Charles will find him something to do, if he's all right," said Lyntie thoughtfully. "Hurry up and make him respectable, Des, 'cause I don't intend to stay away a second longer than ten minutes."

But although John Marsh drank some coffee and ate a sandwich, which was all Charles Mortimer would let him have to begin with, he told them little more about himself. Seeing how exhausted he was, Desmond suggested their going.

"If you can manage, Mr. Mortimer, we'll clear out. Would you like August to ask his father to come up in the morning?"

"Yes, that would be an excellent plan. I can easily manage now, thanks. I'll not try to get our patient upstairs to-night. He'll need more food soon, and the warmth of the fire is good for him. Sure you can get home all right?" he added, crossing to the door with Desmond.

"Easily, thanks, sir."

"Heavens, don't be so formal, my boy. If Lyntie can call me Charles, why not you? I'm not eighty yet."

Desmond flushed.

"I'd like to, Charles, thanks. I suppose we'll have to own up about to-night now," he went on. "My old man won't be exactly pleased with me."

"Then why say anything?" asked Charles Mortimer quickly. "I'd rather no one knew how Marsh got here. I've a plan for him, and the fewer folk that know about to-night, the better. Can the rest of the Octocats keep a secret?"

"Rather!" Desmond assured him. "You can trust us."

"Good. Then get back as you originally intended, and say nothing. I'll ring Dr. Pennrose-Eyre in the morning, if I need him. But we colonials are pretty useful sort of chaps, and there's nothing wrong with Marsh that warmth, food, and time won't heal."

Soon the Octocats were trooping back down the drive, fortified by coffee and sandwiches.

"You did wash up everything you used, didn't you?" asked Desmond.

"Everything, except what Lyn took into the library," Aprille answered. "Why?"

"Because Mr. Mortimer doesn't want anyone to know how Mr. Marsh arrived," explained Desmond. "I don't know why, so it's no use asking me, but I think he's planning to help our find. Anyway, I've promised that none of us will breathe a word about what has happened to-night. I knew I could trust all of you to keep a secret."

"Rather!" agreed August. "Especially when it means saving us from getting into a row. I've a feeling Dad might have been a bit sticky about to-night's exploit."

"Grandad would for sure," burst out Sid. "I'd been thinkin' as 'ow I'd be sent 'ome to-morrer."

"I think it's super of Charles not to give us away," declared Lyntie, "even if he is keeping quiet for his own ends. Do you know the Manor well, Des?"

"No. Why?"

"I only wondered. It seems a fascinating sort of house. I love old places. Perhaps Charles will let us go there and explore some

time. It would be jolly if we could go before there are a lot of maids and people running all over the place."

"Good idea," applauded Aprille. "Couldn't we two go soon and inquire about Mr. Marsh, Lyn?"

"Of course. Are you free to-morrow? I'll ring Charles up in the morning, and let you know what he says. He mayn't want us quite so soon."

"Don't forget we're booked for Cynthia on Saturday," put in August. "Won't she be thrilled when we tell her everything! I suppose we *can* tell her? After all, she's almost an Octocat, and she won't blab."

Desmond ruminated.

"I think we can include Cyn," he said at length. "As you say, she's as safe as an—an oyster, and the poor kid doesn't get much fun. You going straight back to the farm, Frank?"

"Yes, Mr. Desmond. I can easily get in unnoticed. Shall I take the toboggan, Mark? I can keep it in one of the outhouses, and it'll save dragging it all the way, if it's wanted on the Downs again."

"Good idea," approved Mark. "That is, unless we can use 'em on the way back to-night," he added hastily.

"'Fraid not," Desmond said. "We can't go making slides just anywhere. They're dangerous, and from here the road's our nearest way back."

"Look up there on the Downs, Des," cried Lyntie eagerly. "Isn't there a man up there? I wonder if he's looking for John Marsh."

They all stood still and stared up at the rolling whiteness away to their left.

"'Tis a man," burst out Sid excitedly. "And I wouldn't mind bettin' it's that old lag. You'll 'ave to warn Mr. Mortimer, Miss 'Lyntie. If this Mr. Marsh is Splitshoe, and 'e might well be, those two is up to something."

"It's possible, of course," mused Lyntie. "But Mr. Marsh wasn't shamming to-night. His collapse was genuine enough. I'm sure he wasn't just trying to gain an entry into the Manor."

"Nothing put up about that job," agreed Desmond. "I wish we'd thought to examine his shoes. We'd better decide what to say if that man tries to question us. If he is looking for Marsh

and can't find him, he may come down here, thinking he's missed him. We've not met anyone, mind. When Mortimer wants it known that he has someone at the Manor, *he* can spill the beans."

"O.K.," chorused the others.

"What about one or two of us' going up and doing a spot of tracking?" suggested Sid. "If 'e's a crook we might discover something. Perhaps 'e's one of the gang that did that big burglary the Inspector told you about last night."

"I'm sure Mr. Marsh isn't a burglar," burst out Aprille.

"Are you?" Desmond grinned. "Your intuitions aren't always very reliable, Spring. After all, we know Marsh, or someone rather like him, and another man—Sid's lag—met."

"Perhaps they only met by accident," cried Lyntie. "Surely, if they'd been friends, Old Lag wouldn't have let Mr. Marsh go hungry, to wander and collapse on the Downs?"

"That's a good point," acknowledged Desmond. "If you're right, Lyntie, we've three men now—Mr. Marsh, Splitshoe, and Old Lag."

"I'm almost sure Mr. Marsh had on decent shoes with rubber soles," said August thoughtfully. "I'm not quite positive, but I sort of remember noticing them when I tucked my coat over his feet."

"Were his socks wet, Lyntie?" asked Aprille. "Surely you or Des can remember that."

"Everything seemed pretty squelchy," Lyntie owned. "But I didn't notice the socks particularly."

"I think the tops were wet, but not the feet," Desmond said, frowning. "Oh, why didn't we think of clues sooner, and notice more?"

"Because you never thought the man we found might be Splitshoe, Mr. Desmond," observed Frank. "And he quite likely isn't. I'll keep my eyes open for the rest of the night, if you like, and see if anyone comes down from the Downs past the farm. If he uses Parsley Lane, he'd come that way, wouldn't he?"

"Perhaps 'e isn't comin' back," cut in Sid. "If 'e was goin' to-morrer from Mrs. Cox's, 'e might be flittin' in the night."

Mark chuckled.

"He wouldn't gain nothing by that," he declared. "Old Mother

Cox doesn't run any risks. It 'ud be money in advance with her, I'm sure."

"I vote we go there to-morrow and ask about the lodger," proposed Aprille, but Lyntie disagreed.

"That would be foolish, Spring. Let Mark make discreet inquiries. He knows Mrs. Cox, and can probably learn a lot by cautious questioning. A formal inquiry would get us nowhere, and we'd look pretty fools if we were on the wrong scent."

They plodded on for some time in silence, their eyes searching the Downs every time the trees gave them an uninterrupted view. It was Frank who broke the silence.

"Do you know of any houses or farms over that way, Mr. Desmond?" he asked, jerking his hand in the direction the dark figure had so recently taken.

Desmond shook his head.

"Nothing between here and Bramleigh, save, maybe, an old shepherd's hut," he declared.

"Doesn't your local wise woman hang out up there on the heights?" exclaimed Lyntie eagerly. "I've never seen the old crone, but the Monkeys were telling me about her one day. Didn't you say she lived in a tree or something, Spring?"

"No, Lyn, a caravan," Aprille laughed. "But that's only in the summer-time. She just disappears in the winter. I don't think anyone knows where she goes."

"Does she take 'er caravan with 'er?" asked Sid, wide-eyed.

"I don't know. I should think she probably just leaves it up there. Daddy has never let us visit her, in case of infection," Aprille owned rather sadly.

"Coo, I would like to see a witch," cried Sid. "I should think they'd be even more interesting than native princes. Do you think anyone in the village might know where she goes in the winter, Mr. Desmond?"

"I'll ask my father, but I doubt if he'll be able to tell us anything. We might get up a party and explore the Downs a bit, if you'd all like it. We could do that in the daytime, with Authority's blessing."

"We'd better plan a tobogganing picnic," said Lyntie. "That sounds a natural sort of wish for this weather, and wouldn't

arouse suspicion. I'll try to get Primmy talking about this wise woman. She'd probably help a lot, if I can once get her wound up. She's a garrulous old darling. Don't look hurt, Sid. Being garrulous isn't a crime. It only means your Grandma talks a lot, and I'd be one of the first to admit I find her tales interesting. Heavens!" Lyntie stood still, her eyes wide and anxious.

"What's up, Lyn? Seen a ghost, or just had an idea?" teased August.

"Neither. I—I've lost the key of the ballroom."

"The key of the ballroom!" ejaculated Desmond. "What on earth were you doing with it out here?"

"I brought it because I unfastened the window," Lyntie explained. "I thought it would hamper burglars if they found the way in. What on earth shall we do, Sid?"

"Don't you fuss, Miss Lyntie," soothed Sid. "We'll get in some'ow. 'Twouldn't be so bad if we 'ad to stay in the ballroom till the mornin'. We could sneak in early, directly a door or window was opened."

"It's not that, Sid." Lyntie sounded really worried. "Can't you see that the locked ballroom door's going to cause an awful hullabaloo? Your Grandad'll raise Cain, and I just can't lie to St. Bernard if he asks me straight out whether I know anything about the locked door."

"What a mess!" whistled August. "Sure you haven't got it anywhere, Lyn? In another pocket, perhaps?"

"No such luck. It must have fallen out when my coat was covering Mr. Marsh on the sled. Oh, why on earth didn't I put it safely in my trouser pocket? I have been a fool."

"Fools grow without watering," laughed August, in an attempt to relieve the tension. Then he grew serious. "Look here, Lyn, do you think Mason would notice the missing key if the door was open?"

"He mightn't, and even if he did, he'd just think it had fallen out and been swept away or something. Why?"

"Because I've an idea. There's a chap at school whose old man's a big bug at Scotland Yard. Chilvers is terribly keen on detection. Wants to follow in his father's footsteps, I suppose. Anyway, last term he showed me how to turn a key in a lock with a piece of wire, and——"

"But there isn't a key in the lock, fathead," Desmond interrupted. "You can't turn what isn't there."

August's face fell.

"Course not," he grunted. "I'm another one who'll thrive in a drought. You got any ideas, big boy?"

Desmond did not answer immediately.

"I believe there are a lot of old keys in a basket in the tool-shed," he said at length. "I could nip and see if there are any likely ones there, and then come on up to Fairmeads with you, Lyn, and try them out."

"Oh, Des, would you?" There was an eager note in Lyntie's voice. "I'd be everlastinglly grateful to anyone who could get me out of this mess."

"I believe you *can* work the bolt of a lock with a tool, if you've patience and a bit of skill," announced August. "I'm sure Chilvers has done it."

"Won't it make a noise?" asked Aprille. "If people are on the qui vive, they'd be sure to hear you scrabbling."

"A real cheerful Charlie, aren't you?" snorted her brother. "Would you like me to come and help, Des?"

"No, thanks, old chap. I think the fewer the better, and Lyn and Sid can do anything I need. You turn off here, don't you, Frank? Keep your eyes and your ears open, and we'll meet again soon for a general discussion. Cheerio!"

"Good-bye, all. See you to-morrow, Mark, if I can get the time off. If not, Sunday."

"Cheer up, Lyn," encouraged Desmond, when they had been walking for some minutes in silence. "We'll get you out of this somehow, even if it means taking off the whole lock. I could manage to unscrew a few screws without scratching the wood. What's the time? My watch has stopped."

"Nearly three," Lyntie told him. "Gosh, I'm tired."

"So am I," owned Aprille. "My feet are just moving automatically."

It was nearly half-past three when Sid reported all clear, and the three Octocats slipped into the grounds of Fairmeads.

There seemed to be no one about as they stole up the drive and round to the side of the house. An owl screeched, and Lyntie shivered.

"Which window did you leave undone, Lyntie?" whispered Desmond.

"This one. See, the shutter moves quite silently."

In a moment they were all inside, and Sid quietly fastened both the window and the shutter.

"Do you think we dare risk a light?" muttered Desmond.

"I think so. These doors fit pretty well, and I hardly think anyone will be prowling about. But do be as quiet as possible, Des."

"Of course. Sid, flash my torch here, while I take a look at the lock. Hmph! Shouldn't think any of these keys are likely to be much good. I'd better try easing back the bolt of the lock."

For twenty minutes Desmond worked; with only a muttered exclamation when a tool slipped.

"It's no use, Lyn. I'll have to take the whole thing off. Good thing it's not a modern affair; that would baffle me."

Four o'clock struck and still Desmond was struggling with his self-imposed task. Then the torch flickered and went out.

"Hell's bells!" he muttered, half under his breath. "Got another torch, Lyn?"

"No, but we could use the candles from the tree. I'll put down my hanky to catch any stray drippings of grease."

Sid did his best to shield the flame and keep it from flickering, and at long last Desmond gave a tiny whoop of delight.

"Done it!" he gasped. "Hope I've won your eternal gratitude, Lyn."

"You have. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am."

"Cut the bilge," snorted Desmond, but his eyes glowed with satisfaction.

Very soon everything was as it had been ten minutes earlier, only now the door was open.

"I'd better get now, just as fast as I know how," said Desmond, crossing to the window. "Shut up behind me, Sid, there's a good chap. 'Night, Lyn."

"Good night, Des, and thanks a million. I wish you hadn't another long walk before you can get to bed."

"I haven't a toboggan to carry; that's one blessing. Where are you putting yours for the night, Lyn?"

"Under my bed," came the prompt answer. "To-morrow—or rather, later to-day—I'll smuggle it back to its usual place."

Softly the remaining two Octocats fastened the window, then the shutter. Then, with a whispered "good night", they parted.

When Lyntie reached her room she was almost too tired to undress. Exhaustion made her feel cold, and she shivered again.

"Mustn't take cold," she murmured, "or I'll miss all the fun."

Half asleep, she lit the gas fire, and spread her pyjamas to warm. Then she took a precautionary dose of influenza mixture and undressed. She was asleep almost before she had cuddled down into her soft, warm bed. Perhaps she would not have slept so dreamlessly if she could have seen a man standing high up on the Downs, staring at a key that he had just picked up.

"Better keep it, Jake; it may prove useful. It might open a door at Fairmeads, if one of them kids dropped it, and it hasn't been here long, or it'd have been buried in the snow."

Chapter V

HASTE TRIPS UP ITS OWN HEELS

"Well, old chap, how are you feeling now?" Charles Mortimer asked his guest the next evening.

"Much better, thanks. In fact, I'm practically O.K. You've been very kind to me, and I'm grateful. If I might stay here till the morning, I'll be moving on then."

"Where to?"

The thin face flushed, but the jaw was set, and the brown eyes flashed.

"Wherever there's work," came the quick answer.

"Have you any money?"

"No, but I can earn some."

"Can you? It's not so easy, my friend, in the winter, when one is weak with hunger, and insufficiently clad." Charles Mortimer's voice was kind. "How would you like a job here?"

"Here!" John Marsh sat up with a jerk. "What do you mean?" he demanded hoarsely. "You know nothing about me, and I've no references I'd care to offer you."

"Where I come from we don't worry about bits of paper," came the quiet answer. "We take a man on trust, if we like the look of him. His face is his passport, so to speak, and I'm ready to give you a chance, if you want it. I'm looking for an agent for Marsdale. Would you like the job?"

For a long time, only the ticking of the clock broke the silence. Then a log fell forward into the grate, and John Marsh looked up.

"There's nothing I'd like better than to stay here and work for you, but there are things I feel I ought to tell you first. John Marsh isn't my real name, to begin with."

"Isn't it?" Charles Mortimer sounded unconcerned. "Well, it's a decent enough label, and it's good enough for me. If you prefer it to your own, that's your affair. I'm not curious."

"Then I'll take the job, and I swear you won't regret it. But how are you going to explain me to your servants?"

"I haven't any yet, save the Rudes, and I don't think they are likely to ask for explanations. Too much afraid I might retaliate," and Charles Mortimer laughed heartily. "I shall tell anyone who is interested that you lost your way to the Manor, missed the last bus or something, and caught a chill from an overdose of snow. For appearances' sake I'll ring up Pennrose-Eyre and ask him to give you the once-over. He's the local medical practitioner and the father of two of the Octocats."

"Octocats?" John Marsh sounded puzzled.

"Yes, a party of boys and girls. They found you up on the Downs and brought you here on a toboggan. You owe them quite a lot. If they hadn't decided to steal out at night for some fun, you might now be toasting your toes at a bigger fire than this."

"But won't they have talked?"

"Not they. I told them not to, and I can trust them to hold their tongues. True, I've only known them a couple of days, but I flatter myself that I'm a pretty good judge of character. Lyntie Dimsdale's a thorough little sport."

"Who is she?"

"The great-niece of Sir Bernard Allardyce over at Fairmeads.

Jolly nice family, I can tell you. They had me over there for Christmas Day and made me feel wanted, and I think you can imagine what that means to a stranger in a foreign land."

John Marsh nodded.

"I think I can," he agreed. "I know what I feel like, sitting here talking to you. I hope I shall see Miss Lyntie and her friends and have an opportunity of thanking them."

"You certainly will. Lyntie phoned up this morning to ask how you were, and when they could come over. Like all healthy youngsters, they're curious, and I rather think Miss Lyntie—like me—has taken a fancy to one—John Marsh."

"Oh, I hope not—I'm sure not," stammered the young man awkwardly. "Perhaps little happens in a small place like Eversley, and anything unusual is welcome excitement."

Charles Mortimer regarded his new agent thoughtfully.

"Do you know Eversley?" he asked.

The stranger's face flamed.

"How could I?" he fenced. "I was unconscious on arrival, and I haven't left the house since."

"But this isn't Eversley," came the quiet voice of Charles Mortimer. "This is Marsdale."

"Aren't they near to each other, then? The signpost gave me that impression."

"Oh, yes. Matter of six or seven miles, that's all. I'm glad you're not known in the district. It will be easier to explain an unknown agent. Lyntie's sister and her friend are coming over to-morrow to discuss staff. Miss Marsden has offered to interview and engage those necessary for me. I don't care too much for Rudge and his missus. I think I'll offer them the east lodge. It's the farthest from the house. I'm a queer bloke, but I never could stomach deaf and surly squinters. I like to know when people are looking at me. Don't you?"

John Marsh laughed, and his laugh was hearty and yet puckish.

"Lucky for me I don't squint," he joked, "or I might be on the tramp again by now. But seriously, Mr. Mortimer, there's something I must tell you before you take me on. I've been inside for nearly five years."

"I guessed that," Charles Mortimer said easily. "Whatever you

did, you've paid for it, and I for one shan't hold it up against you. No one else need know, unless you wish to tell them."

"You're a white man, Mortimer. I'm not going to tell you I was framed and plead innocence, though it's true in a way. I was a fool, an utter and complete fool, and I deserved all I got. The judge said so, and of course they're always right."

Charles Mortimer ignored the bitterness in the other's voice.

"Know anything about an agent's job?" he asked, abruptly changing the conversation.

"Well, er—yes and no. I have learnt a bit about estate management, and I think I'll get along all right. Perhaps you'll take me round the place soon. Shall I live here, or in one of the cottages?"

"Here, please. I'm lonely, and I need someone to support me when I shove the Rudes into a cottage. How many staff ought I to have here, Marsh?"

"Let's see. There should be a butler and a housekeeper, three or four maids, and the gardeners—I should say three ought to be enough for these grounds. What about a chauffeur?"

"I'll run my own car when I get it. So you think three gardeners will be enough for the Manor grounds. Given to guessing, aren't you?"

For a moment John Marsh did not speak. He sat looking into the fire, apparently lost in thought. Charles Mortimer watched him silently. He, too, was obviously thinking deeply.

"It looks as though I'll have to come clean," Marsh said at length. "I've already given myself away twice. I never was the type to stop and weigh every word I uttered. I have been to Eversley, Mortimer, and I have seen Marsdale Manor. But that was long ago, and I've changed a lot since then. No one's likely to recognise me. They won't be interested in a new agent when there's a new squire to talk about."

Far into the night the two men sat talking, and when they finally parted, both were satisfied.

The next afternoon Vanessa suggested running Valerie over to Marsdale Manor in her new car. Just as they were ready to start, Lyntie came dashing down the steps.

"Do take me as far as Sally ~~Shadweeks~~," she begged. "I have to be at the Fellowes' by three, and you know how Hydrotite hates people being late."

"Then why didn't you start sooner?" asked Vanessa dryly. "You've been simply ages getting ready."

"No, I haven't. I was teaching Rep to say nice things, and forgot the time. I'd have made it all right if dear old Mr. Harrison hadn't written and asked for another guide book to the old Saxon church there. He was our rector in Gulverton Bay, Valerie, and such a kind soul. He helped us lots when we were poor, and it's such a joy to be able to give him a little pleasure now."

"Hop in, then," ordered Vanessa. "We don't want to be late, and the roads may be a bit tricky. Besides, you've got to run a new car in before you begin to speed."

When Lyntie jumped down outside the village shop, she stood gazing at it affectionately. There was something about Sally Sudweeks and her shop that was satisfying. Neither seemed to change a scrap. In the quaint bow window were the same packets of ants' eggs, and the same celluloid dolls, though the latter were slightly less shiny than they had been in the summer. Cards of universal remedies were suspended from the back, and in one corner, paint brushes, elastic, groceries, tobacco, and corn cures jostled each other every time the shaky shop door was opened to the accompaniment of a shrill bell.

"Good afternoon, Miss Sudweeks," said Lyntie, with her usual bright smile. "Have you another copy of that guide to the church?"

"I'm sure I have, Miss Lyntie, but the trouble is, where are they? They were on that table, but I had a man in here wanting post cards, and I took them off to make room for the albums. They should be with the books. Will you look, my dear? Your eyes are younger than mine."

Obligingly, Lyntie did as she was asked.

"I don't think they're here," she said, after a careful search.

Miss Sudweeks frowned.

"Let me try and remember," she twittered. "Old Mrs. Hayes came in for a tin of salmon almost at once, and I had a job to find one. I must have put those guides down then. Are they on the fish shelf, dearie?"

"No, but there's a box of hairnets behind the cocoa. Oughtn't they to be over there with the slides?"

"Of course they ought, my dear. Alas, I'm a terrible muddler. My dear mother used to say I never put a thing in the same place twice. Oh, I remember. The stranger wanted a map, and they are right at the back with the toilet rolls. I so rarely get asked for a map. Yes, here are the guides. What a good thing I remembered!"

"Thanks so much. How much are the maps?" Lyntie asked.

"The motoring ones are two-and-six, but the footpath ones like that man had are only one-and-six."

"May I see one, please? We thought of tobogganing on the Downs, and we don't want to get lost. There aren't any houses beyond Marsdale Manor and the farm till you get to Bramleigh, are there?"

"No, dearie. Nothing but Mad Margie's caravan, and Arty Mills's shepherd's hut beyond the dewpond."

"Where does Mad Margie go in the winter?" asked Lyntie, hunting in her purse for half a crown.

"I can't rightly say, Miss Lyntie. Some folk think she has a daughter over Cowfield way, but others think she knows of a cave near the old quarry and goes there."

"But she must have food," argued Lyntie. "Where does she get that from?"

Sally Sudweeks shook her grey curls till they danced.

"I wouldn't be knowing, Miss Lyntie. I don't know the poor soul. Now, mother knew her well, and didn't believe she was as mad as she tried to make folk think. But there, I don't know. Did you have a nice Christmas up at Fairmeads? I hear the new Squire from Marsdale was up there. That was a sad business. I loved Master Jeremy, with his golden curls. Wild he was, but his heart was as gold as his hair. Poor old Mr. Marsdale was lonely when he lost Master Jeremy. The new gentleman's an Australian, I hear."

"Yes, he is. You'll like Mr. Mortimer. He's very nice," declared Lyntie warmly. "I'm glad there's someone at the Manor. Have you any fresh chocolates?"

"Yes, dearie, and I do know where they are, since you said not to put them near the soap. That's always lived on the shelf behind the door, so the chocolates will be up here. Yes, here we are. Do you want a box, or some loose ones, Miss Lyntie? Or perhaps some bars?"

"No, I'll have that box with the cats on the lid. It's for Miss Cynthia, and she'll like those. How much?"

"Two-and-three, Miss Lyntie. It's a half-pound."

"Good, and I'd better have half a pound of toffees for the rest of us, or else we shall eat all Cynthia's chocolates before tea. No, there's really nothing else, and I must race. Good-bye, and many thanks."

Lyntie sped off, overtaking Aprille and August near Blenheim Lodge, where the Fellowes lived.

"Here comes the human tornado," grinned August. "If you're not more careful, Lyn, you'll slip up and break something."

Lyntie chuckled.

"I was thinking I'd save Hydrotite an extra journey to the door," she explained. "I saw you two on ahead, and I know how the poor soul loathes padding to the door and breathing some really fresh air."

"It is cold," said Aprille. "And Daddy says old people feel it. Personally, I think good old Mackintosh is pretty marvellous. Our two maids together don't get through half what she does."

"Oh, she's a treasure all right," agreed Lyntie warmly. "And I love her, if only for being so sweet to Cyn. By the way, has Des told you we managed to get the door open?"

"Haven't seen him since our moonlight jaunt; but Spring gathered, from what you said on the phone, that everything was O.K."

"I hoped she'd understand," laughed Lyntie, "but I was phoning in the hall, and Mason was wandering round like the immortal Jew. I didn't want to water his suspicions; they sprout unaided at the slightest provocation. Ask Sid."

"Is he coming to-day? Cyn asked him and Tilly and the twins, I know," said Aprille.

"Tilly's still away, and the twins are working," Lyntie answered. "I think Sid was shy of coming without any of them, so he found he had to go out with Grandmama. I've to make his excuses. Look, there's Des. Let's wait for him, and save Hydrotite still more."

When Mackintosh opened the door her usually stern features were crinkled in a smile.

"All four of you together," she said briskly. "That's how I

like it. I haven't time to keep running to answer doors. Parties mean work, and I wouldn't do it for anyone but Miss Cynthie."

"It's lucky for us that you'll do it for her," August murmured. "Life would lose half its joys without your teas."

"Get along with you, Master August. Leave your wet things in the lobby and go on up. The mistress is busy in the kitchen, so Miss Cynthie's all alone, poor lamb."

"We'll soon cheer her up, Hydrotite," Lyntie promised. "We've heaps to talk about."

"That I don't doubt, Miss Lyntie," chuckled the old maid. "Nimble, that's what your tongue is, but you don't tire Miss Cynthie, I'll say that for you. 'Alf starved she is, with only us old folk for company. Ready? Then off you go."

Cynthia was lying on a comfortable couch near a glowing fire, and her whole face lit up as the quartet entered.

"Hello, Octocats," she cried welcomingly. "This is fun. I hope you've all heaps to talk about. I've been feeling quite dull to-day, after all the excitement of Christmas. Lyntie, darling, I haven't seen you to thank you for that marvellous stamp album you gave me. I've already had a lovely time transferring my nicest specimens into their new palatial home."

"So glad you liked it, Cyn," Lyntie responded. "I thought it might help to pass a few wintry hours, and August is always bursting to stamp with anyone."

"You needn't scoff," said August calmly. "It's a great hobby —intellectual, too. Most girls haven't the brains to be serious collectors."

Cynthia gurgled.

"Thanks, August. 'Tisn't often one wrings a compliment from you. Do find comfy pews, all of you, and then tell me about the new Squire of Marsdale. Is he jolly?"

"Rather!" burst out Lyntie eagerly. "He's a sport, and a great acquisition to the district. We've such heaps to tell you, Cyn, that I don't know where to begin. Sid couldn't come, he had to go out with his Grandmother, and the twins are working. Tilly's still away, and so we are the only four coming."

"You're better than nothing," laughed Cynthia. "You can tell me about the new Squire, and all you've been doing since we last met."

"If you want to hear everything you'd better leave it to me," said Desmond quietly. "We'll have to get through a lot in a little time, or Mrs. Fellowes will be up before we've finished."

"Oh, is it a secret?" asked Cynthia eagerly. "An Octocats' secret?"

"Yes. On Thursday night, we four, with Sid and the twins, went for a spot of tobogganing by moonlight. While we were up on the Downs above Marsdale, we found a man half buried in the snow."

"A man!" gasped Cynthia, her hazel eyes wide with amazement. "Was he dead?"

"No, but he had collapsed and was unconscious," Desmond told her. "We got him on to the Bardons' sled and took him to the Manor. Lyn roused Charles Mortimer, and he behaved splendidly. He took the poor chap in, and did everything for him. In fact, he's still at the Manor. We think he's to have a job there, because Charles made us promise not to tell anyone about how he got there, or where we found him."

"What a thrilling story!" burst out Cynthia. "I think your Mr. Mortimer must be awfully nice. Do you know the name of your—er—foundling?"

"Marsh, John Marsh," burst out Lyntie. "But exciting as all that is, it's not the most exciting part of the story, Cyn. On Christmas night, while we were having our tree party, I took Rep up to bed—oh, I'll have to tell you about Rep, too—and I saw a man in the grounds. As soon as we could, Des and I went to investigate, and found Sid doing likewise. He'd seen the man, too, peering into St. Bernard's study, and later he saw him meet a man who's staying at one of the cottages in the Bardons' lane. Sid's sure this man is a crook, an ex-convict he once saw in London, so we think these two men may have been responsible for that big burglary on Christmas Eve. Sid saw our man—we call him Splitshoe because by his footprints we could see he'd a split right shoe—make off for the Downs, and we're wondering if he can possibly be John Marsh."

Cynthia's eyes were shining with excitement.

"Oh!" she gasped. "It's all so thrilling. I never thought we'd have another adventure so soon. Thank you for sharing it with me. Of course I won't breathe a word,"

"We know that," declared Aprille. "Aren't you an honorary Octocats?"

Cynthia nodded happily.

"What are you going to do next?", she asked.

"We aren't quite sure," Desmond answered. "You see, on our way home from the Manor we saw a man on the Downs, probably Sid's old lag. That's what made us wonder if John Marsh is implicated. If so, oughtn't we to tell Charles Mortimer?"

"I think so," mused Cynthia. "Tell him all you know or suspect, and then it's up to him."

"Mark says Mrs. Cox's lodger's gone," broke in Lyntie. "Went off in a hurry, by all accounts. Mrs. Cox was quite put out about it, regarded it as a personal insult to her cooking or something. Cyn, do you know anything about Mad Margie? You've been here a long time, and people tell you things."

Cynthia frowned.

"What on earth has poor old Mad Margie to do with it?" she asked in a puzzled voice. "She's hardly ever seen these days, and rarely comes down to Eversley, though I believe Nanny did once say something about Mad Margie being Mrs. Rudge's aunt."

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed August. "That's an eye-opener. I've lived here all my life and never heard that. In fact, I don't remember ever having seen these Rudges."

"Neither have I," owned Desmond. "But what Cyn's just told us may explain a lot."

"How?" demanded Aprille.

"Because the Rudges seem a funny couple, not over friendly from what Charles says. Perhaps they have guilty consciences."

"What on earth do you mean?" burst out Lyntie. "Don't hint, Des. Tell us what you're thinking."

"Nothing much, but no one seems to know where Mad Margie goes in the winter. What price Marsdale Manor?"

"Marsdale Manor!" echoed the others.

"How would that affect *our* mystery?" asked Aprille curiously.

"I don't know," Desmond admitted. "But it might."

"Imagine Marsdale Manor the headquarters of a gang of

criminals," cried August dramatically. "Arrival of new Squire throws a spanner in the works, and the gang are homeless, save, of course, for the Rudges. Old Lag turns up at Mrs. Cox's for just long enough to meet the others and make plans. Splitshoe is trailing over the Downs to Mad Margie's caravan, but collapses and is taken to Marsdale Manor. Once there, he can keep an eye on Mr. Mortimer, and . . ." August trailed off, and Desmond began to laugh.

"Shades of Chilvers!" he gasped. "You've been reading too many thrillers, old chap. If John Marsh is Splitshoe and one of a gang, he'd not have been starving. Still, I'm quite keen to meet the Rudges. Do you think we're likely to be invited to the Manor, Lyn?"

"Aprille and I are going on Monday," Lyntie told him airily. "I rang up yesterday morning, and Charles invited us then to tea on Monday. Van and Val have gone to-day to fix up about staff. Not that that'll help us, 'cause we can't question them. I must remember not to have met John Marsh. Deception's jolly wearying. By the way, Des, Daybreak's tearing his hair over the lost key. I think he's a bit suspicious. I noticed him examining the lock pretty thoroughly when I went in to get something off the tree."

"Another mystery?" asked Cynthia. "The lost key, I mean."

Quickly Lyntie told her.

"You do have fun," sighed Cynthia, rather wistfully. "And who's Rep, Lyn?"

"Rep's short for Reprobate, and he's a parrot," laughed Lyntie. "But it ought to be written PARROT in big capitals," she went on. "He was a Christmas present from the Jeffersons, and he says the most unexpected things."

"How gorgeous!" Cynthia exclaimed, her eyes dancing. "But I thought there was only one Jefferson, Lyn."

"There was, but there isn't any more," Lyntie explained rather ambiguously. "Mr. Jefferson's sailor nephew Tony's turned up, complete with Rep. His language wasn't beautiful enough for Mr. Jefferson's artistic soul, and so I have the fascinating bird. Shall I bring him to see you, Cyn?"

"Oh, yes, *please* do. He sounds thrilling. I've always thought I'd like a parrot."

"I bet Hydrotite wouldn't," grinned August. "Why, whatever's up with Lyn? She's flown off as though all the fiends in hell were after her."

In a moment Lyntie was back, a packet and a bag in her hands.

"I quite forgot these," she explained. "Chocolates for Cyn, and toffees for us. Have one, Spring?"

"Golly! Fancy having money for sweets a few days after Christmas," muttered August. "Or are they Christmas presents, Lyn?"

"They are *not*. I popped into Sally's on the way here and got them. I can always think better when I'm sucking."

"I wish there were something we could do," sighed Aprille. "I *hate* standing still and just waiting for things to turn up."

"I think you've done a tremendous lot already, Spring," said Cynthia, untying her box of chocolates. "Remember, haste trips up its own heels."

"Wise old owl, aren't you, Cyn?" chuckled Lyntie. "No, we are *not* eating your chocolates. Keep them till we've gone, and have a toffee with us now. I keep wondering what P.C. Chubb would do if there were a big burglary in Eversley."

Aprille giggled.

"He'd suck his pencil and make lengthy lists, and ask endless futile questions," said Desmond brusquely. "Pentland's no fool, but our Charlie's the world's biggest."

"And dearest," put in Lyntie. "He may be slow, but he's sweet. Now let's sum up before Hydrotite arrives with tea. What facts have we to work on?"

"Sid's old lag has left the neighbourhood suddenly, after meeting Splitshoe," burst out August. "Splitshoe has also disappeared, after taking an unusual interest in Fairmeads, unless he and John Marsh are one and the same. Old Lag last seen on the Downs heading for Bramleigh. What about a few investigations there?"

"That's an idea," agreed Desmond. "Couldn't we suggest an outing to Bramleigh? I don't believe Lyn's ever been there."

"I haven't, but is there anything to see?" asked Lyntie. "We must appear reasonable, and Van's a fussy old hen sometimes."

"Oh, we'll think up something," August declared easily. "If

Old Lag hasn't been seen in Bramleigh, he's stopped somewhere *en route*. Where?"

"Sally said something about a cave near the old quarry," volunteered Lyntie. "Ever heard of it, anyone?"

No one had.

"Search for cave near quarry," went on 'August. "We've always ways of getting out—tobogganing's a good excuse while there's snow. Cyn's told us that Mad Margie is related to Mrs. Rudge, caretaker at Marsdale Manor. Can this be proved? If so, perhaps Mad Margie is hidden at the Manor."

"Can't see how it'll help to clear up the burglary and Old Lag and Splitshoe, if she *is*," remarked Aprille.

"Don't try to spoil our fun," begged Lyntie. "We're creating a lovely mystery, and we don't want it ruined. I for one mean to solve the riddle of John Marsh, and if he's *not* the prying Splitshoe, to prove it. Do any of you know that St. Bernard was once a famous judge?"

"Was he?" Cynthia sounded interested.

"I hadn't the faintest idea," burst out 'August excitedly.

"Nor had I," echoed Aprille.

"I believe I have just heard it," observed Desmond. "But it evidently made little impression. What made you think of that suddenly, Lyn?"

"Only that there may be a connection somewhere," Lyntie answered. "I feel sort of responsible for St. Bernard, and I know you'll all be behind me. Judges often make enemies who try to get their own back, don't they?"

"In books, yes." Desmond sounded rather supercilious. "But there's been no burglary at Fairmeads. I think there's little we can do, save cultivate John Marsh, make an expedition to Bramleigh, and keep our eyes skinned for Old Lag and Splitshoe."

"Here's tea," cried August. "I can hear china tinkling, and there's Mrs. Fellowes talking to Hydrotite. I vote we forget everything save grub for the next half-hour."

'And to judge by the mountains of dainties that they consumed, the others were very ready to fall in with August's suggestion.

Chapter VI

'ALWAYS AT IT WINS THE DAY

"Really, Lyntie, I think the idea of a picnic on the Downs in this weather is mad," snorted Vanessa the following Tuesday morning. "If you young idiots want to catch pneumonia, I can assure you your relatives don't want to nurse you."

"Gollipops, you are het up, my sweet!" Lyntie laughed. "What's upset you, Van?"

"You. Partly, anyway, and Daybreak's an old fusspot, too. He keeps on about that wretched ballroom key. I told him it had probably dropped out and been swept up by a sleepy housemaid, but he doesn't agree, I know, though he doesn't actually contradict. He wanted to tell Uncle Bernard, but I won't have him worried."

"Quite right," began Lyntie lightly; then she grew suddenly serious.

"There's nothing wrong with St. Bernard, is there, Van? I mean, he's not ill or anything?"

"No, of course not, but he's not young, and we ought to spare him all we can. By the way, Val, do you want to go to that dance on Thursday night? I *must* let Charles know this morning."

"Rather! I'd love it. How are we going to get there?"

"In my car," Vanessa told her. "Charles and Tony are meeting us there. Tony's staying in Brighton for a couple of nights, and Charles has to go in early on Thursday to interview staff. He'll probably stay the night there, too, because interviewing takes time, even though you've weeded out the impossibles, and arranged for the necessary women. After all, there's still the butler and the outdoor staff to be engaged. I'm glad Charles has found such a nice agent."

"He is nice, isn't he?" broke in Lyntie. "Aprille and I saw him yesterday, and quite fell for him. You and Val are terribly lucky to be going to dances, Van, and I think it's mean of you to try and deprive us of a little fun. Just because *you* don't care for tobogganing, it doesn't mean that *we* shouldn't be keen."

The snow will be gone soon, and then we can't have a snow picnic."

"Let them go, Van," pleaded Valerie. "They won't come to any harm, and we don't often get enough snow for tobogganing down here."

"When did you want to go, Lyntie?"

"Either to-day or to-morrow, whichever the rest can manage. And may we have Sid to help carry the grub?"

Vanessa laughed.

"If Uncle Bernard agrees, you may."

"Oh, he will. He hardly ever refuses me anything, unless it's really bad for me, and if he can prove to me that it is, I never want it. If you'll excuse me, I will go and ring up Desmond and the Monkeys, and see what they can fit in. Then I'll see St. Bernard."

In ten minutes she was back, her eyes dancing.

"Everything's fixed for to-morrow, Van. The Pennrose-Eyres are throwing their New Year party in the evening, but we'll be back early. Mrs. Pennrose-Eyre says the Monkeys are more trouble than they're worth, and she'll be glad to get rid of them for lunch. She's going to give the Doctor something cold on a tray. She's all for the scheme."

"And Desmond?"

"Oh, he's coming. He answered the phone himself. I've seen St. Bernard too, and all he said was: 'What it is to be young! Tell Mason that Sidney is to go with you, if you need him.' I tore out and found Sid. He was with Muzzle, so I persuaded that grumpy sugar-stick to say Tilly may come if it's fine. Now I'm going to fix things with Cook," and she sped off like a whirlwind.

"I envy that kid her powers of enjoyment," said Valerie rather sadly. "It's good to love living as she does."

"Don't *you*?" Vanessa's tone was questioning. "I thought you loved your life."

"I do up to a point, but I'm beginning to think it lacks something. I'm certainly not wedded to it as you are to Heronscourt. Oh, don't take any notice of me, Van. It's just that your happy family life here is waking something in me. Nina Lethbridge's a dear, of course, but she is temperamental, and that can be

awfully exhausting. But I'm not going to grouse. What are you wearing on Thursday? Will my yellow taffeta do?"

"Do! It's charming. It makes my blue look quite shabby. But no one expects a blue-stocking to bⁿ smart."

"Ass! You're distinguished, and that's worth much more than mere prettiness. But let's stop throwing bouquets at each other and get out. Can you spare time for a brisk walk? I want some stamps."

The next day was lovely. For the first time since before Christmas, the sun broke through, and soon blue sky stretched overhead. Lyntie's spirits soared. She rushed madly about, getting into everybody's way, until only Rep was sorry when she joined Sid and the packed toboggan outside.

"Tilly'll be waiting for us down at the gates, Miss Lyntie," volunteered Sid. "She's that excited at coming, and Mark says we can 'ave their sled if we fetches it from the farm. Real sorry 'e is, not to be comin', but I tell's 'im we'll soon be 'avin' another night do."

"Of course we will, Sid. We must make the most of the snow while it lasts. With this sun it'll soon begin to melt, I expect."

Tilly came running out to meet them as they reached the lodge. She was wearing a red woolly suit that accentuated her dark prettiness.

"Oh, Miss Lyntie, I am excited," she burst out. "I was afraid Mother wouldn't let me come. I know she thinks a snow picnic is foolish, so do let's get away before she changes her mind and hauls me indoors again."

Lyntie laughed.

"We'll not let you go now we've got you," she declared. "All the same, we will hurry. Sunny though it is, it'll be cold standing about, and we're not any too early."

Soon the merry sextet were up on the Downs, heading for Marsdale Farm, and Desmond went on ahead to fetch the Bardons' sled.

"Let's snowball while they're gone," suggested Aprille. "It'll warm us up."

"And tire us out," warned Lyntie. "We're not out for pleasure to-day, you know, and it's a long trek to Bramleigh."

"Are we going to Bramleigh?" Tilly sounded surprised. "I've

an aunt living there, but I don't like her much. Neither does Mother, so I don't have to go there. But Jimmy's all right. He comes to see us sometimes."

"Who's Jimmy?" asked Aprille.

"My cousin. He's about Sid's age, and quite a sport. Uncle's quite good fun, too, but Aunt Jane's temper is awful."

"I've an idea," cried Lyntie. "Could your cousin keep a secret?"

"Oh, Jimmy's O.K.," said Tilly easily. "Why?"

"Do you think we could get hold of him?" Lyntie went on. "You see, we want to know if any strangers have been seen in Bramleigh since Christmas. It's important."

"Bramleigh's so small that Jimmy'd be sure to know," Tilly declared. "Is it a secret—an Octocats' secret?"

Quickly, Lyntie told her all that had happened while she was away, and Tilly's eyes grew bigger and bigger.

"Then you believe Mrs. Cox's lodger and Splitshoe are planning something, Miss Lyntie, and we're to find out what it is. Do you really think Mr. Marsh is Splitshoe?"

"Frankly, no." Lyntie spoke even more definitely than she felt, for she knew Tilly, and feared she might unintentionally give away the Octocats' suspicion. "And we want to prove it beyond doubt, by tracing Old Lag and Splitshoe. If they went off over the Downs, they're pretty sure to have gone through Bramleigh."

"Not necessarily," argued August. "They might have avoided all villages till they were well away, and then picked up a Brighton-bound bus."

"They might, of course." Lyntie spoke testily. "But I'm not leaving any stone unturned, and a strange man, who might be one of our trio, did buy a footpath map at Sally's. If anyone wants to hurt St. Bernard, they'll have to get over the Octocats first. Also, I vote we find Mad Margie's caravan and explore that. Does anyone know where it is?"

No one did.

"Jimmy will," burst out Tilly, eagerly. "He knows the country round there pretty well. You see, he's friendly with Arty Mills, the shepherd, and goes up to his hut sometimes."

"That's fine," smiled Aprille. "Jimmy may know where Mad Margie is. We'd love to meet her."

"Would you?" Tilly sounded surprised. "I think I'd be too

scared to enjoy it. She—she's mad, you know, and puts spells on people."

"I'd like to see 'er try it on me," scoffed Sid. "Why, I should think you'd be glad of anything in the country to liven things up."

"When are we going to have our picnic, Lyn?" asked August. "That's the only thing likely to liven me up this morning."

"We'll have it in an hour's time, and not a moment before," declared Lyntie firmly. "Here comes Des. Now we can get on. I vote we climb right up to the top, and then have our grub before tobogganing down to Bramleigh."

"That sounds wise," agreed Desmond. "I think the thaw will soon come if this sun lasts, and then a boat'd be more use to you than a sled. That's the worst of our climate. You never get time to grow proficient at anything needing snow. One can skate, of course, at the S.S. Brighton, but that's not like ski-ing or tobogganing."

"Des, listen," burst out Lyntie. "Tilly's got a cousin at Bramleigh, who may be able to help us. She says he's sure to know if anyone's been there, and he also knows where Mad Margie's caravan is."

"Good show!" approved Desmond, heartily. "How do you propose getting hold of your cousin, Tilly? We don't want everyone to know we've been to Bramleigh."

"That's the difficulty," Tilly admitted ruefully. "I can't go to the farm without causing no end of trouble."

"But *I* can," cried Sid eagerly. "No one knows me, and I could easily go and ask for a drink. In these old clothes, I might easily be taken for a little ragamuffin. Once there, it'll not be *my* fault if I can't entice Jimmy away."

"I'm sure it won't," laughed Lyntie. "It's a good idea, and the best we're likely to have. I wish this snow weren't so soft; it's getting almost slushy in parts. I suppose the Downs will be green again by to-morrow or Thursday."

On and on they plodded, clambering up, and slithering down the folds of the Downs, till finally they reached the highest point and saw Bramleigh lying in the valley below.

"Now for lunch," burst out August. "I'm nearly dead with hunger and weariness."

"You look it," jeered Desmond. "If you want grub, stir your stumps and come and help Sid to unload it. We'll let the girls off after their long tramp, but not *you*."

Unwillingly, August did as he was told, and soon everyone was munching delicious sandwiches, and drinking hot coffee.

"This is good!" exclaimed Aprille. "I never used to like coffee much, but to-day I wouldn't swap it for anything in the world."

"I told Cook we'd like heaps of interesting sandwiches," Lyntie told them. "And I see she's packed us other things as well. There's a whole box of mince pies, and wedges of Christmas cake. There are oranges, too, and dates, and crystallised fruit, and a tin of real shortbread."

"I spy a tin of chocolate fingers," laughed Desmond. "Those are a real weakness of mine. They and squashed flies are my two favourites."

When even August had had enough, they packed the meagre remains back into a box.

"Can't we leave everything here till we return?" suggested Lyntie. "We shall have to come back this way, shan't we, Des?"

"It's the quickest, and I should imagine Mad Margie's caravan would be up here. If we want to see that, we can't return by road. Let's hide our stuff near that clump of trees. They're a landmark, and we'll find our cache again easily."

Soon the three toboggans were speeding and bumping down towards Bramleigh. Desmond and Lyntie led. They were followed by Sid and Tilly, while the Pennrose-Eyres brought up the rear. The way was not as smooth as it looked, and often the sledges turned over, or had to be negotiated up a sudden incline. But nobody minded, and it was a rosy, jolly party that finally neared the village.

"Pity you look so pink, Sid," giggled Aprille. "You don't look starving now, I'm afraid."

"I'm not supposed to be," Sid retorted. "It's a drink I'm goin' for. You'd better all wait 'ere, and I'll come back as soon as possible, complete with Jimmy, I 'ope."

"Good luck, Sid," said Lyntie. "We'll rest here and cool off. Wish we had the prospect of a drink."

Sid went off, and was soon out of sight. This was a job after his own heart, and he turned in at the gate and went to the back

door, full of concealed excitement. He knocked on the door, with what he considered just the right amount of noise. It was opened by a ginger-headed boy of about thirteen.

"What luck!" muttered Sid. "Are you Jimmy?"

The boy nodded, but did not speak.

"Meet me outside when I go," whispered Sid quickly.
"I—"

"Who is it, Jimmy?" called a fretful voice from inside.

"Please, could you give me a drink?" asked Sid politely.

"It's a boy wanting a drink, Mum. Can I give him one?"

"I suppose so. There's some broth from dinner, left in the pot on the stove. It'll still be hot. He can have a cup of that, if he's a decent lad and not a thief."

"I've never stole nothing in my life," cried Sid indignantly.
"I'm honest enough, and I'd be glad of a drop of hot broth."

Swiftly, Jimmy filled a large cup and brought it to Sid.

"Come in and shut the door, can't you?" snapped the woman.
"You'll spoil my bread with your draughts. Hurry up."

Sid obeyed, and Jimmy closed the door. Fortunately, the soup wasn't too hot, and Sid could drink it fairly quickly. Jimmy was watching him closely, and Sid was able to wink at him unobserved.

"Thanks a lot," he muttered, setting down the empty cup.
"Real good that was. Good day to you, ma'am, and a blessin' on your 'ouse."

The woman glanced at him suspiciously, but she was too much interested in her kneading to do more than snap:

"Good afternoon, and mind you don't send anyone else here, because we don't feed tramps. Understand?"

"I won't send nobody," Sid promised readily.

"I'll see you off the premises," grunted Jimmy, grabbing his coat. "Shan't be long, Mum."

Before his mother could say anything, Jimmy was outside with Sid, heading for the gate.

"What's the big idea?" he growled. "Who are you, and what do you want with me?"

"My name's Sid Scroggins, but that's of no interest. It's your cousin that wants you—Tilly Muzzle. She's just round the bend with some of 'er friends."

"Tilly!" gasped Jimmy in surprise. "What on earth is she doing here, and what does she want?"

"She'll tell you. Come on, let's run."

Panting, they reached the others. Tilly sprang forward on seeing her cousin.

"Hullo, Jimmy. I'm so glad Sid found you. We want your help. At least Miss Lyntie and Mr. Desmond do."

"We're members of a secret society," burst out Lyntie, eager to interest this blue-eyed, ginger-haired stranger, "and we're tracking a man we believe to be a criminal."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Jimmy. "It's like the flicks. How can I help?"

"By telling us if you've seen any strangers in Bramleigh within the last week," Desmond told him. "We think our man may have come this way. It would probably be last Friday or Saturday."

Jimmy frowned thoughtfully.

"I don't remember no one," he said slowly. "At least, no one's stayed here, I'm sure. I believe a stranger did go into the shop on Saturday for some bread, but he was just passing through."

"Had he a car or anything?" asked August.

"I don't know, but I should hardly think so. Motorists might stop for a meal, but not for bread. I believe he had two loaves, and no motorist'd eat that much before reaching a town with proper slap-up shops. Do you think he might be your man?"

"It's possible," mused Desmond. "But to-day's Wednesday, and he's probably miles away by now."

"Unless 'e's lying low somewhere 'creabouts," suggested Sid. "What about that there caravan?"

"What caravan?" questioned Jimmy. "Do you mean Mad Margie's?"

"Yes. Do you know where it is?" asked Lyntie eagerly. "We want to know if she's there."

"Not she. Margie always locks up 'bout October, and only gets back in the spring."

"Where is she now, then?" Aprille inquired.

"No one really knows. Mr. Mills says she goes to relations, but 'e don't know where."

"Then she doesn't live in a cave near the old quarry?" Sid said in disappointed tones. "I'd 'ave liked to 'ave seen 'er."

"She ain't much to look at." Jimmy pondered. "Tall and sort of scraggy, with stringy grey hair nearly down to her shoulders. The one thing about her you can't help noticing is her eyes. Very dark they are, and all glittery, and she looks at you as if she didn't always see you. I'll show you where the caravan is, if you like, and we could go into the quarry cave on the way. It isn't very far from here."

"Lovely!" cried Aprille warmly. "You are a sport, Jimmy."

"Tisn't nothing. I'll be glad of a bit of company. Tilly knows 'tisn't a lot of fun at home, and you're a sporty set."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Desmond said simply. "I vote we get cracking. We've a long way to go back, and we mustn't be late, Monkeys. That would be rotten for your mother, after all the trouble she's taken to throw this party."

They set off climbing back up the Downs, dragging their toboggans. Jimmy attached himself to Sid and Tilly, and they all talked a great deal.

"Cute kid," muttered August, as though Jimmy were years younger than himself. "I'm looking forward to exploring the cave. Anyone got a flash? I foolishly didn't bring mine."

"Neither did I," growled Desmond. "But I have a box of matches, if that's any help."

"Perhaps it won't be dark in the cave," suggested Lyntie. "Let's ask Jimmy."

"No, it isn't exactly dark, 'cause there's a large opening," Jimmy explained. "It's fairly shallow, you see. I think it's a sort of made cave, not a natural one. Perhaps the men working in a quarry made it as a sort of shelter."

"Then it's not the kind of place where anyone could live if they wanted to hide?" asked Lyntie.

"Gosh, no. You won't find your criminal in there, if that's what you're thinking," Jimmy laughed.

"Does Aunt Jane know where you are, Jimmy?" questioned Tilly anxiously. "I'm surprised Sid got hold of you so easily."

"Mum's busy baking, and she won't miss me. She'll think I'm with Dad, I 'spect. You know she won't eat bought bread, but half kills herself once a week making loaves. 'Twas lucky you

chose to-day for your visit, or I'd never have got out. We branch off here, and drop down through that dip. Then we'll be almost in the quarry."

"Much as I love the sun, I wish it weren't so hard on the snow," sighed Aprille. "My feet are quite tired of slugging a way through. I wish we could toboggan a bit."

"You can't here," Jimmy declared, shaking his head. "'Twouldn't be safe. You'd just shoot right over into the quarry. Nothing to stop you. If there's time, I could show you a lovely slide. You've got some smashing toboggans."

It took them nearly fifteen minutes to reach the quarry, but once there, they soon sighted the cave. Fortunately, it was near the top, and so they had not far to climb. They found it most disappointing. Small, bare, and exposed, it seemed an unlikely hideout for anyone.

"There isn't even a passage leading from it, where anyone could shelter," Desmond pointed out. "I think it's a mouldy hole. Thanks for bringing us, all the same, Jimmy. It's been interesting, and has proved one of our ideas to be impossible."

"Do you want to go straight to the caravan now, or would you care for a bit of sport first?" Jimmy asked wistfully.

Lyntie, always eager to be kind, smiled at him.

"We can play for twenty minutes," she told him, after glancing at her watch. "That any good?"

"Rather, if we hurry! The run's only just over there."

They certainly enjoyed themselves, and everyone was sorry when Lyntie and Desmond insisted on their leaving and going on to the caravan.

"It wouldn't matter so much if it weren't for your party, Monkeys," Lyntie said firmly. "But as Des pointed out, we can't let your mother down. Hurry up, Jimmy, and take us the shortest way to Margie's castle."

Jimmy giggled.

"You are a scream," he declared. "'Tisn't much of a castle, only a shabby old horse-drawn caravan, without either horse or shafts. Been battered by the weather, too, though it is in a sheltered spot near some trees."

"Not the clump of trees on the top of that hill?" asked August. "Right on the other side it is, but not far from there," Jimmy

explained. "Do you want to climb, or shall we go around the bottom path?"

They all forgot that they were even the slightest scrap tired when they saw the caravan looming up ahead of them. It was well hidden from all sides, except where the Octocats and Jimmy were, because it stood in a hollow scooped out of the side of the hill. Behind it stretched trees that acted as a wind break, and a curve of the Downs sheltered it from the front.

"Pretty good spot to put it," approved Desmond. "Strikes me Margie's no fool. Why, Jimmy, what's wrong? You look worried."

"The shutters is down," cried Jimmy in puzzled tones. "They weren't last week when I was up here with Mr. Mills. Surely Mad Margie can't be back already."

"Shouldn't think so," mused Lyntie. "There's no fire," she went on, gazing at the smokeless chimney. "Perhaps the high winds have displaced the shutters, Jimmy."

"Maybe," Jimmy muttered, but he did not sound convinced.

"Let's go and investigate," proposed August. "Standing here won't get us any further."

They tore off at a run, and reached the caravan breathless.

"Doesn't seem to be anyone about," said Desmond. "Why, Jimmy, what's the matter now?"

"It's the door; it's open," came the worried answer. "Someone's been here, and recently too. Just look inside and see that mess. Margie wouldn't have left it like this."

"Does your Margie smoke cigs?" asked Sid. "'Cause 'cre's a stump. Players, I should say."

"Not she. It's a pipe or nothing for Margie," Jimmy declared.

"Then it must be our man," cried Aprille excitedly. "Oh, isn't this thrilling?"

"Look, Des, do you see what I see?" cried Lyntie, who was at the top of the steps, gazing in.

"What, Lyn?"

"On the floor there, look. It's a key, isn't it, and I'm as sure as I can be that it's the one I lost."

"Jeminy!" exclaimed Desmond excitedly. "If you're right, Lyn, it certainly looks as though Old Lag or Splitshoe is hiding here."

"He won't come back while we're here, will he?" asked Tilly anxiously.

"Not likely. He won't want to tackle seven healthy specimens like us. Got the key, Lyn? Is it your lost one?"

"I'm sure it is. And finding it here proves one thing, Des. Either Old Lag is here, or Splitshoe isn't Mr. Marsh. He was already unconscious when I lost this key."

Desmond nodded.

"Anything else of interest there?" he asked. "If not, I vote we get on. We've got to collect our grub and things, and then trudge nearly five miles home."

"We can ride part of the way, can't we?" Aprille sounded anxious. "I feel tired, and Tilly looks fagged out."

"It's been worth it," Tilly protested loyally. "And I'll be all right after I've had a drink and something to eat."

"Wise woman," grinned August. "I'll race you to the grub."

But when they reached the trees and found their things, the square food-box was empty.

"Sure you've not got the wrong box, August?" questioned Lyntie. "Look in all the others."

The search proved fruitless.

"Do let's go," begged Tilly. "If the convict's pinched our grub, he can't be far away. I'm scared."

"Don't be a donkey, Tilly. You're safe enough with us," snorted August. "I'd like to see the blighter, and tell him what I think of him. We haven't even had Sid's drink, and I'm literally starving."

"I think it's been worth it," said Desmond quietly. "We've learned a lot to-day, thanks to Jimmy. We know someone's using the caravan, and that someone is probably Old Lag or Splitshoe. If we keep on as we've begun, we'll piece together the whole mystery before we're through."

"That's the spirit," approved Lyntie. "Always at it wins the day. I suppose you'll have to leave us now, Jimmy. Thanks awfully for your help, and we shall hope to see you again soon."

"That's O.K. by me. I'll keep an eye on the caravan, and see if I can spot who's using it. 'Twill be fun having something to do."

"Good, and if you discover anything, send me a card," said Desmond. "My post never arouses any interest."

"Mr. Desmond lives at Eversley Rectory, Jimmy. You know Mr. Halliday, don't you?"

Jimmy nodded, and promised to let Desmond know at once if he found out anything.

A few minutes later, he was trudging back to Bramleigh, and the six Octocats were striking out for home.

Chapter VII

A CROOKED STICK THROWS A CROOKED SHADOW

Nearly a week had passed since the Octocats had gone to Bramleigh and met Jimmy. The snow had completely disappeared, and the weather had turned warm and wet. Lyntie was feeling depressed and disgruntled, for Aprille and August had gone in to Brighton with their mother to buy new clothes for school, and Desmond was not free.

"I think I'll go for a long tramp, Rep, old boy," she said. "I can't fug indoors just because it's raining."

"God save the King! Long may he reign!" shrieked Rep. "Poor old Rep! Rep's a sailor, a hell-falutin' hofficer."

Lyntie gurgled.

"Good old Rep!" she laughed. "You're a host in yourself. No one can be blue for long with you about. I'll get on some weather togs and tramp till I'm tired. There's something quite refreshing about walking in the rain in a green world. I wanted a white Christmas, and I had my wish, so I'll not grumble any more."

"Grumble, grumble, and you're sure to tumble," chuckled Rep, winking. "Bless St. Bernard, bless St. Bernard!"

Laughing, Lyntie ran off, eager to be out of the house, and in ten minutes she was hurrying down the drive, sniffing the rain-drenched air like an old war horse.

"Gosh, this *is* good!" she muttered. "I never knew I liked rain so much."

Soon she was stepping out along the high road, as though eager to win sports honours. Half-way to Marsdale she turned off down a lane, where there was less likelihood of being splashed by passing motorists.

"Cars are all very well when you're in 'em," she mused sagely. "But they're not such fun when you're walking and they dash by, splashing you from head to foot. Never mind. This old mack's had its day, and I'll soon have a new one."

She was about a mile and a half from Marsdale when she suddenly saw a figure crouching in the ditch. As she drew near, she realised that the gaunt woman with the piercing eyes and stragling wisps of hair *must* be Mad Margie. Impulsively she ran up.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her smile lighting up her whole face. "I'm afraid you must be hurt. You're Margie, aren't you?"

"Margie, Mad Margie, that's me," hinnied the old crone, staring at and through Lyntie. "Pretty lady can't help Margie," and she shivered.

"You're cold," cried Lyntie impulsively. "And wet. Here, take my warm scarf and tie it over your head. It's Angora and very warm. You oughtn't to be out without a coat on a day like this. Let me take you home."

Margie took the scarf in silence and sat staring at it. Then she stroked it gently, mumbling under her breath as she did so.

"Put it on," advised Lyntie. "It's lovely and soft. Let me help you."

"You are kind. It is long since anyone save Emma was kind to Margie. Tie up my head, little lady, and I will try to walk."

"Is it your leg you've hurt?" asked Lyntie, as she fixed the soft scarf deftly over the thin grey hair.

"I dropped my pipe. It is somewhere in the ditch. When I looked for it, I fell. The pain is bad, but soon it is better, but my pipe, it is still lost."

"We'll soon find it," declared Lyntie, with plenty of assurance. "Perhaps you've fallen on it. Let me take your hands and pull you up. I'm very strong."

Before the old woman could object, Lyntie had seized her toil-worn hands, and was pulling with all her strength.

"There!" she gasped. "Lean against that tree while I find your pipe."

Silently Margie obeyed, and she stood there, watching, her six feet dwarfing Lyntie's five.

"Here it is," cried Lyntie gladly, for the muddy ditch was not a pleasant hunting ground. "Put it safely away in your pocket, and then lean on me. I'll take you home."

"Home," muttered Margie, putting her hand on Lyntie's shoulder. "Home is far away up on the Downs. Too far for me to climb to-day. I am tired."

"Of course you are," soothed Lyntie. "But we aren't far from the Rudes' nice little house. They will look after you, and give you a hot drink. Is your leg very painful?"

Margie shook her head.

"A crooked stick throws a crooked shadow," she muttered. "They all believe I have the evil eye. To help me would hurt them. You are different."

"I should jolly well hope so," said Lyntie quickly. "I believe that a little help is worth a lot of pity. I may hurt myself some day, and then I'll be glad to be helped. Mind that stone! We don't want more accidents."

The pressure of Margie's hand was growing heavier and heavier, but Lyntie was determined not to let the old soul realise this.

"We're getting on splendidly," she said brightly. "I think the rain is less now, don't you?"

"The sun will shine in a few hours," Margie prophesied, glancing at the sky. "I love the sun. It is warm."

"Do you feel cold?" asked Lyntie.

"I feel little, but I hate the winter. I long to be free, to be alone. But they say a caravan is not enough in winter. He doesn't want me, I know, but Emma is good and I go. Let us rest a moment, pretty lady. My legs are old and worn out. I cannot hurry."

"Why should you?" Lyntie spoke patiently. "You need not hurry, but I don't think you ought to sit down again till you are home. You are wet, and we don't want you ill."

The old soul chuckled as though enjoying a huge joke.

"Me ill!" she hooted. "Margie is stronger than ten strong horses, and she is never ill. Do not worry. Margie and the weather are friends."

"I'm sure you are." Lyntie humoured her as she would have done a child. "But perhaps I am less weatherproof," she added artfully.

The old crone turned her head and stared down at Lyntie.

"That is not so," she stated simply. "The weather will not harm us, because we love it in all its moods. I love the wind when it blows over the Downs, whistling through the trees, and bending everything to its will. I love the sun and the moon, the day and the night, the spring and the autumn. Only people hurt Margie; they do not understand."

"Some do," whispered Lyntie gently. "I don't hurt you, do I?"

"You are of the wind and the rain, the sun and the snow, the light and the dark. There were fairies at your christening, pretty one."

"Were there? How lovely! I wish I could remember all about it."

"They gave you many gifts, like love and happiness. You are good, and Margie won't forget."

"Oh, rot!" expostulated Lyntie awkwardly. "I've done nothing. See, there is the lodge. We'll soon be home now." For a moment there was silence, then Lyntie, eager to break it, asked abruptly: "Do you like parrots?"

"The bird that talks comes from the devil. But the good people clip his wings, and now he is no longer of any use to his old master. You have a parrot?"

"Yes, and I'm awfully fond of him. He was a Christmas present, and already I've taught him to say lots of things, like 'Bless St. Bernard'."

For a moment the piercing dark eyes again scrutinised Lyntie intently.

"You are from Fairmeads?" she asked.

"Yes; Sir Bernard is my great-uncle."

"The Hugger is a just man, but many fear him, and because they fear, they hate. He should beware of his enemies. Teach your bird to cry, 'Murder, fire, thieves!'"

For a moment Lyntie shivered. Mad Margie's warning roused all the girl's latent fears.

"Do—do you know something?" she blurted out.

"Mad Margie knows nothing. Everyone will tell you that. Her words are worthless, and she cannot pierce the veil of the future."

There was a note of bitterness in Margie's voice that waked all the chivalry in Lyntie.

"Don't talk like that," she begged. "I'm sure you are wise, and see more than any of us. It isn't that I don't believe your warning, but I love my uncle and am afraid for him."

"Fear killed more than the physician," croaked the old soul. "Remember that, and remember also that many feared *The Hugger*. Do not be afraid, little lady of Fairmeads. The Hugger is no more."

Silence fell on the strangely assorted pair, and it lasted till they reached the east lodge. As they approached the front door, it opened to reveal Mrs. Rudge. When she saw Lyntie, her face grew white. For a moment she stood there, staring, then tears flooded her eyes.

"Oh, Miss Lyntie," she burst out, "whatever shall I do?"

"Let us come in, please, Mrs. Rudge," said Lyntie quietly. "Your aunt is very wet, and she has hurt her leg."

"You—you know?" gasped the lodgekeeper in amazement.

"Yes, Miss Cynthia told me. Her nanny, Mackintosh, knew. But why shouldn't I know? It's not a secret, is it?"

Mrs. Rudge did not answer. She was watching Margie stride through into the kitchen, water dripping from her skirt on to the clean floor. Then she pulled herself together with an effort.

"Miss Lyntie, you are wet, too. You must have a hot drink. You lent your beautiful scarf to Margie. It was kind of you. I don't know how she got out," she went on, lowering her voice. "I am most careful never to leave the door undone, but she is artful, and to-day she tricked me. I never thought she'd want to go out in this rain."

"Why shouldn't she go out?" asked Lyntie in surprise. "It wouldn't hurt her so long as she wore a coat. She loves freedom and is miserable shut up indoors. I am like it, too, and so I can understand."

"That's just what you don't do, miss, begging your pardon,"

Mrs. Rudge declared. "You see, no one's to know she's here. Rudge says so, and I can't go against him."

"But why?" Lyntie looked and sounded puzzled.

"He says we'll lose our home and our work if anybody knows we've got her here."

"But that's ridiculous. Why should anyone mind? I'm sure Mr. Mortimer wouldn't."

"I'm sure I don't know, but Rudge isn't a man to argue with. Come to the fire, Miss Lyntie. Margie's evidently gone up for dry clothes. Here are her wet ones, just dropped on the floor. The kettle's boiling, and I'll soon have a nice cup o' tea ready. Miss Lyntie, could you—would you mind not telling anyone about my aunt? You see, she's daft, and people don't like her about. She can't stay in that flimsy caravan in the winter, and there's no one'll have her but me. Rudge was furious when he found I'd got her up at the Manor, and during the move we had terrible difficulty to hide her."

"I think you're acting very foolishly," declared Lyntie firmly. "This is your home, and no one's likely to interfere with your guests, Mr. Mortimer least of all. Can't you make your husband see that it is wrong to keep poor Margie boxed up? It's so unnecessary, too, and causes you much endless anxiety."

"You may be right, miss, I don't know, but you'll never make Rudge see it."

"May I try?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you'll tell me where he is, I'll tackle him, and try to make him see how foolish he is."

Mrs. Rudge gasped. The idea of anyone telling her lord and master that he was foolish froze her with horror. She gazed open-mouthed at Lyntie, too dazed to speak.

"Where is he, Mrs. Rudge?" Lyntie persisted.

"He's working in the grounds," Mrs. Rudge blurted out, as though forced to speak against her will. "The master said he could do a bit to get things ship-shape, if he liked to earn a little extra."

"Splendid idea. I'll run him to earth and make him see reason. Don't you worry, Mrs. Rudge. Now, if that tea's ready, I'd love a cup."

It took Lyntie some time to run Rudge to earth, and when she did, he did not seem pleased to see her. He merely acknowledged her greeting with a grunt, and stood leaning on his spade, glaring at her.

"I've come to talk to you, Mr. Rudge, about your wife's aunt," she began boldly. "I found her this morning and brought her home. Your wife seems to think you don't want anyone to know Margie is with you. Why?"

"I don't know who you think you are, to come questioning me," he snarled. "Emma's a fool, as big a one as her precious aunt, to let the old girl out. Margie ain't anyone's business save ours, see?"

"That's just what I told Mrs. Rudge," Lyntie burst out. "I'm *so* glad you agree with me. She seemed to think you didn't want Mr. Mortimer to know about Margie. Just as though he'd care what you do in your own home!"

"She were at the Manor, too," growled the old fellow crustily.

"And why not? You couldn't ask permission when there was no one to ask, and it's natural enough that you should offer the poor old soul a home in the winter. I think it's fine of you, and so will Mr. Mortimer."

"Not so fast," cut in Rudge. "Who says Mr. Mortimer's going to know 'bout Margie?"

"Well, isn't he? You can't keep anyone like Margie boxed up indoors. It would be cruel. That *would* infuriate Mr. Mortimer. He just wouldn't understand that. Mayn't I tell him about poor Margie? I *know* he'll not mind, and your wife will be so much happier, to say nothing of Margie."

"And if he don't understand and sends us packing?"

"He won't, but if he did, I know my uncle would have you all at Fairmeads. But I'm positive you've nothing to worry about."

"That'd be a change. Agent chap's always fussing round, and Margie's never where she ought to be. Relations are a blessed nuisance, I say."

"You say lots you don't mean," laughed Lyntie. "You're like our Muzzle. He's as crusty as can be outside, but dig deep and he's all sugar-stick. You're like that, Mr. Rudge. You take in a

poor old soul and give her a home, and then cause no end of trouble by trying to hide your light too far under the bushel. I think Margie's jolly sensible, and she must be free to come and go at will. I'm on my way to the house, so I'll put things right with Mr. Mortimer."

"Well, I'm blessed!" A slow smile spread over Rudge's usually taciturn features. "If that don't beat all. Here have I been guarding the secret for months, and you says I need never 'ave bothered. Well, tell if you must, but don't say as 'ow I wanted you to. If you fails, you'll have a lot to answer for. I never 'ave fancied living in a flimsy cupboard on wheels."

"You won't have to. All this secrecy has made you nervy and irritable. The sooner you come out into the open and are yourself again, the better for everyone concérned."

"I ain't so sure. 'Tisn't as though we was old servants. Only been here about four years. Mr. Lutwyche got us this job. Nice gentleman, he is. I wouldn't like him to think we'd let him down."

"He won't. I can promise you that," Lyntie assured him quickly. "Good-bye, Mr. Rudge. You'll soon be as happy as the day is long. Next time I run you to earth you'll be singing the Hallelujah Chorus."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. 'Tis a powerful long time since I was in the choir."

"Were you in the choir?" Lyntie chuckled inwardly. "What fun!"

"That was many years ago, long before we came down here. I'm not at all sure as 'ow I ought to let you talk, but I suppose I can't stop you. You seem so cheerful that perhaps you're right. It's to be hoped so, seeing as 'ow your mind's made up. Tired I am of the whole business."

"Of course you are. Good-bye, Mr. Rudge. You'll be grateful to me some day."

She hurried off up the drive to the house, and rang the door-bell. It was opened almost at once by a short, round little man, with a florid complexion and a fringe of white hair.

For a moment Lyntie was surprised. She had forgotten that the new staff must have arrived by now, but she quickly recovered herself and asked for Mr. Mortimer. Before the butler

could speak, Charles Mortimer came into the hall and saw Lyntie.

"Hullo, Lyntie," he cried jovially. "It's all right, Jevons, Miss Lyntie Dimsdale is always welcome here. In fact, I am always at home to anyone from Fairmeads."

The butler bowed, and Lyntie flashed him a smile, and handed him her dripping mackintosh, before she followed Charles into his den, as he called the library.

"I hope you don't mind entertaining a drowned rat, Charles?" Lyntie asked with a chuckle, as she knelt on the rug before the fire. "I don't often gatecrash, but to-day it's important."

"You heard what I told Jevons," Charles said seriously. "I want you to believe that you are *always* welcome here, Lyntie. We are friends, aren't we? I feel honoured that you should trudge through the rain to see me."

"I didn't set out to visit you," Lyntie owned honestly. "I probably shouldn't have come here if I hadn't met Mad Margie."

"Mad Margiel Who on earth is she?"

"Mrs. Rudge's aunt, and she's not really mad, only old and lonely, and different from the usual run of people. I'm sorry for her, and so I asked Rudge to let me come and tell you the whole story." Lyntie paused, but Charles Mortimer did not speak, and so she went on. "You see, the Rudges have been so scared of you that they've tried to shut poor Margie up. She escaped to-day, and I'm jolly glad she did. It appears that the Rudges have been taking her in in the winter, and she's stayed here without anyone knowing it. Then you came. They were frightened you'd turn 'em out if you knew about Margie, and so they smuggled her to the east lodge."

"But—but why on earth shouldn't Margie stay with them?" asked Charles in bewilderment. "Why make a secret of such a thing?"

"That's what I asked. But Mrs. Rudge is terrified of her husband, and does everything he tells her. When I tackled him, he owned he was afraid of being sent packing. They aren't local people, you know, and perhaps there's something in their past that they aren't too proud of. I don't know. But I am sure they're straight enough now, except for keeping Margie more or less at your expense."

“Are you sure that that is Rudge’s only crime?” demanded Charles Mortimer quickly. Then his eyes began to twinkle. “I’ve never liked the chap—he squints—but I’d certainly not dismiss him for being good to his wife’s aunt. You say that this poor soul spends the winters with them. What does she do in the summer?”

“Oh, she has a caravan up on the Downs. It’s not very far from the place where we found Mr. Marsh. How is he now, by the way?”

“Fit as a fiddle. Decent chap, and I’m grateful to you for finding me such a good agent.”

“I’m glad he’s all right. I was afraid he had a past.”

“What on earth made you think that?” asked Charles Mortimer in surprise.

“I—I don’t really know, but, well, it seemed strange finding him like that.”

“Don’t worry any more about Marsh, Lyntie. He’s all right, and we’re quite good friends already. I’ve quite a big staff now, and they all seem very nice. What do you think of Jevons?”

“The butler? Oh, he’s a typical specimen. Very dignified and very correct, and probably very human, just like Daybreak. But to go back to the Rudes. You will tell them you understand, and Margie can stay, won’t you, Charles? She needs freedom, and should be allowed to wander in and out at will. So far, her only vice is that she smokes a pipe.”

Charles Mortimer chuckled.

“So do I. That’s not a vice but a virtue. If a woman *must* smoke, let her go the whole hog and do it thoroughly. Of course I’ll see Rudge and put things straight. If that’s all that’s worrying him and upsetting his temper, the sooner he learns to laugh again the better. What about collecting your gang and coming to tea this afternoon? I’ve a staff now, and you’d be very welcome. You told me you’d like to explore the Manor, and it would be something to do on such a wet day.”

“It’s a lovely suggestion, and I’d adore it,” cried Lyntie. “But I’m afraid Desmond and the Monkeys aren’t free. That’s why I’m on my own this morning. The twins are working, and without them I don’t think Sid and Tilly would enjoy it much. I—I suppose you wouldn’t let me bring Cynthia Fellowes?”

"Cynthia! Isn't that the invalid honorary member of the great Society of Octocats?"

"Yes. She'd love to meet you, and if Uncle will lend me Dakers and the car, we could manage it, I think. Even Hydrotite couldn't object to her going to the Manor in a car."

"Hydrotite? You do have strange names in these parts."

"Oh, her real name's Mackintosh, but Aprille had a mackintosh called a Hydrotite. This tickled the boys, and Desmond immediately re-christened Cynthia's poor old Nanny."

"What it is to have a sense of humour! Of course I'd love Cynthia to come, if you think she won't be bored."

"Bored! Cyn's never bored. She's the sweetest, cleverest, most patient person I know. It'll be a treat for her to go out, she so rarely does, and she's longing to meet you."

"I hope I shan't disappoint her. Marsh can show you round, while I entertain your friend. Although he's only been here so short a time, he seems to know the Manor inside out."

"It'll be gorgeous!" declared Lyntie, springing to her feet. "May I use your phone, please? I *must* know if Cynthia can come, and you'll want to know, too."

Quickly Lyntie rang Fairmeads, and received Sir Bernard's permission to use the car. Then she got into touch with Mrs. Fellowes, and persuaded her to let Cynthia accept Charles Mortimer's invitation.

"Yes, I'll call for her in the car at a quarter to four," she said happily. "Thanks tremendously for saying yes. We'll take the greatest care of her, and I know she'll love every minute of the time. Good-bye."

"Everything settled satisfactorily?" asked Charles Mortimer, as Lyntie hung up the receiver.

"Rather! We'll be here about four. I *am* looking forward to it. And I know Cynthia will be, too."

"Good. So am I."

"I suppose I must go now if I'm coming again this afternoon. I've had a super morning, and I thought it was going to be so dull."

When Lyntie called for Cynthia that afternoon, she found her quite ready. Her hair shone like gold, and there was a flush on her usually pale cheeks.

"Oh, Lyn," she cried happily. "This is fun! It *was* good of you to ask me. I've been longing to meet Mr. Mortimer and your foundling—the possible Splitshoe. I can take part in everything better if I actually know the people concerned. I've never been to Marsdale Manor. Old Mr. Marsdale was rather a hermit, I think, and no one saw much of him—or of his nephew, who was always away, first at school and later at college."

"But surely he came here for his holidays."

"I never heard that he did. He probably went to friends. Oh, is that the Manor over there? It looks a lovely place. But I think I like Fairmeads better."

"To be frank, so do I, though the Manor is old and interesting too. I'm longing to explore it. By the way, Cyn, I've met Mad Margie."

"What!" cried Cynthia, startled out of her usual calm. "When? Where?"

"This morning in a muddy ditch in the rain," Lyntie giggled. "She'd hurt her leg, and I helped her home. She is staying with the Rudges, and I persuaded them to let me tell Charles the whole story. They had some mad idea that he'd kick them out if he knew, but of course he won't. I believe she knows something, Cyn. She called St. Bernard The Hugger, and uttered warnings."

"How thrilling! You seem to attract excitement, Lyn. All you active Octocats do."

There was a slightly wistful tone in Cynthia's voice that Lyntie was swift to notice.

"And when we're up against things, or find a clue too difficult to solve, we come to you, and you find the answer," she declared firmly. "We'd never have found St. Bernard without you, and we shall need you again to solve this mystery, I'm sure. But here we are at the front door. Would you like Dakers to carry you in? He knows how to."

"Please, Lyntie, and thanks for being so--so sweet."

"Hornswoggle!" snorted Lyntie inelegantly.

Chapter VIII

TALK LIKE ROBIN HOOD WHEN YOU CAN SHOOT WITH HIS BOW

Jevons, the new butler at Marsdale Manor, had finished for the day. He looked at the pleasant fire in his room, and decided to sit and have a quiet smoke before turning in. He had hardly changed into his slippers and made himself comfortable when there was a knock at the door, and it opened to admit John Marsh.

"You—you want something?" asked Jevons, rising to his feet.

"Yes, a talk," said Marsh shortly. "I want to know what your game is."

"My game? I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you do. Don't fence. I recognised you directly you arrived, but this is the first chance I've had of talking to you. I want to warn you that if there's any dirty work afoot, I'll blow the gaff."

"Two can play at that game," sneered the butler. "I think Mr. Mortimer might be interested in your past record."

"He knows all about my having done time, so you can't blackmail me. I'm not here on false pretences."

For a moment the butler regarded the agent in silence; then his attitude changed.

"Come and sit down," he invited. "Let's talk quietly. I'm sure you're the last one to want to hurt a fellow. You never were one to hit a chap when he was down. I'm not up to anything, and I swear Mr. Mortimer won't suffer through my being here. I just want a chance to run straight like you."

"Ever heard of a chap called Jake?" asked Marsh abruptly.

"Jake? Jake who?"

"Jake Turner. He's a nasty piece of work, and where he is there's generally trouble. I met him down here the other day, and then you turned up, and so of course I drew my own conclusions."

"Then you'd better think again. I don't know your Jake, and

I've got this job because I know a butler's work and can do it. I'm steering clear of trouble in future. There's no big money in this work, but it's safe, and I've had enough of prison. Give me a chance. Does Mr. Mortimer know who you really are?"

"No," came the quick answer, and immediately Marsh knew he had made a mistake.

"Then if you don't want me to broadcast your identity, you keep quiet and give me a chance."

"I will, on one condition, and one only," Marsh told him. "So long as you lead an exemplary life, you're safe, but kick over the traces and I'll not hold my tongue."

"That's O.K. by me. We've both secrets we'd rather keep, so it will suit us better to be friends than enemies. Have a smoke?"

"No, thanks. We'll never be friends, but if you're really on the up grade, I'll keep your secret. I don't think you're a bad fellow at heart, merely weak, and I know what bad company can do for one. I've no animosity against you. I'm going up now. Not too fit yet. Good night."

"Good night," returned the butler, and a moment later he was alone. "Fool!" he muttered under his breath, but whether he was referring to himself or to Marsh, it was impossible to tell.

The next morning while she was at breakfast, Lyntie was summoned to the phone.

"Who is it, Daybreak?" she asked.

"Mr. Desmond, Miss Lyntie, and he said it was important."

"Must be if he's up at this hour," Lyntie grinned. "Excuse me, Van," she said perfunctorily, as she slipped from her chair and hurried out of the room.

"Hello, Des," she cried. "What's up? You don't usually ring so early, and you sound excited. . . . What? Jimmy wants to see us? . . . When? To-day? . . . Yes, I think I can manage it. What time? . . . Eleven o'clock at the old mill half-way between here and Marsdale? . . . Yes, of course I know the place. How are you going to let Jimmy know we're coming? . . . Oh, I see. He's taking a chance and going there. Are the others coming? . . . You haven't asked them yet? Well, I'll roll up, and Sid, and possibly Tilly. Will you get the Monkeys? . . . Yes, it does sound exciting. I've news for you, too. I've met Mad Margie. I was going to ring you this morning, but you've beaten me to it. What

did you say? . . . Yes, it is rather thrilling. . . . All right, I'll be there. *Au revoir.*"

When Lyntie returned to the dining-room her eyes were dancing. Vanessa was quick to notice this.

"What are you up to now?" she inquired.

"Nothing. Why? Des merely wants to know if I'm free this morning and can go for a walk. I've promised to meet him at eleven o'clock. Any objections?"

"Don't be late for lunch," was Vanessa's only answer.

Fortunately Sid was free, or said he could be in time to join them at the mill by eleven o'clock. Tilly had gone to Brighton with her mother, but this did not greatly distress Lyntie, for fond as she was of the younger girl, she often found her rather a hindrance.

Desmond joined Lyntie near the Rectory, and they picked up Aprille and August as they passed Silver Birches, the doctor's house.

"Do you really think Jimmy's on to something, Des?" asked Aprille eagerly, once they were away from the village. "I feel terribly excited."

"I don't know much. Here's the card he sent. Read it aloud, Spring, and then we'll all know as much as each other."

Aprille took the card and began to read.

"Will you all meet me to-morrow, Wednesday, at the old mill half-way between E. and M.? I've something to tell you that I think you ought to know. Jimmy."

"Short and sweet like the donkey's gallop, but none the worse for that," muttered August. "I only hope he's not dragging us off on a wild-goose chase."

"I shouldn't think so," said Lyntie. "If he'd intended to do that, he'd have done it before this. I liked young Carrots and I think he's canny. Something's aroused his suspicions, I'm sure."

"Well, we'll soon know," Desmond remarked. "Supposing isn't much use. In ten minutes we'll be at the mill and then, unless Jimmy's late, we'll hear his story."

"Tilly will be mad to miss this," cried Aprille. "After all, Jimmy's her cousin, and we owe him to her."

"I'm sorry for the twins," put in Lyntie. "Since Frank went to the farm he's not been so much one of us, and Mark's always

so busy now he's had a rise in wages. They're conscientious, those two, and I like them for it. Sid's meeting us there."

"Good. What was it you said on the phone about having met Mad Margie, Lyn?" asked Desmond.

"I thought that would interest you," Lyntie laughed. "I thought yesterday was going to be such a dull day, and it turned out to be *so* exciting. In the morning I found poor Margie hurt in a ditch, and took her home. She is living with the Rudgets, and I put that right with Charles. They were afraid to tell him in case he sacked them, silly idiots."

"What's Margie like?" questioned Aprille. "Is she very mad? I'm sure I'd have been scared stiff of her."

"I'm sure you wouldn't. She's rather a dear, and not really mad at all. Just a bit unusual, perhaps, but I rather agree with Sally Sudweeks' mother that Margie isn't as loony as she'd like folk to think. She knew all about The Hugger, anyway."

"What do you mean?" demanded August.

"Just what I say. She knows St. Bernard was called The Hugger, and she's warned me to teach Rep to say 'Murder, fire, thieves!' I've been trying to ever since, and he's nearly got it."

"Whew!" exclaimed Desmond. "Do you think she knows of some plot and is afraid to talk?"

"That's what I wondered," admitted Lyntie. "She says many feared him, and because they feared, they hated. She quite made me shiver, she sounded so prophetic."

"Do you think the Rudgets are in it?" asked Aprille. "I suppose you saw them."

"Oh, yes, and I'm pretty sure Mrs. Rudge knows nothing. I'm not so sure about Rudge. I should hardly have thought secreting an aunt would have caused his hang-doggedness, but one never knows."

"Did you tell Charles about Margie being at the lodge?" asked Desmond.

"Of course. It seemed so silly to make a secret of it. I made Rudge let me, and I think in his heart he was quite glad. Cynthia and I went to the Manor to tea yesterday."

"Did you? You lucky things!" Aprille sounded envious. "Did you see over the Manor?"

"Yes. Mr. Marsh took me round while Charles talked to

Cynthia about Australia. She thoroughly enjoyed it, poor kid. She liked Marsh as much as we do, so perhaps he isn't Splitshoe."

"Is he really better now?" asked Desmond.

"Yes, I think so, though he hasn't left the Manor grounds yet. St. Bernard asked me to invite them both over to dinner next week. Charles accepted with alacrity, but Mr. Marsh refused. Said he didn't feel up to visiting yet. I think Charles was surprised. It sounded such a palpable excuse, somehow."

"I had a chat with Chubb yesterday," Desmond told them. "He's been keeping a close watch, and he hasn't noticed any strangers or seen anything suspicious."

"Here's the mill, and if I'm not very much mistaken, Jimmy's there waiting for us," cried August. "I hope our promising mystery isn't going to peter out."

Jimmy greeted them with a rather shy grin.

"Isn't Tilly coming?" he asked.

"'Fraid not. She's gone to Brighton with her mother," Lyntie explained. "She'll be sorry to miss this confab, I'm sure. Have you some exciting news for us, Jimmy?"

"It's about your man," began Jimmy. "At least I *think* he's your man. It was the same man as bought the two loaves the other week, anyhow."

"You mean you've seen him again?" asked Aprille eagerly.

"Yes. It was on Monday afternoon. Mum had sent me to the shop for some cocoa, and he came in while I was waiting to be served. I hung about, and I saw him buy more bread and some tins of stuff. When he came out I went after him. It was soon pretty obvious that he was making for the Downs, and I longed to follow him. But you don't know my mum. She was waiting for that cocoa, and I *had* to go home. I got out again as soon as I could, and raced to the Downs. Fortunately I know a few short cuts, so I managed to get up to those trees near the caravan before the man."

"Wait a sec," cut in August. "Here's Sid. He'll want to hear it all, won't you, Sid?"

"Rather! Sorry I'm a bit late," Sid apologised. "I'm all ears now, Jimmy, so spill the 'aricots."

Jimmy grinned, and in a few minutes told Sid what the others already knew.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Sid. "What 'appened next?"

"Nothing for a bit, and I was just wondering if I'd mucked things up, when your chap turned up. He come up to the caravan all sort of suspicious, and I was scared he'd see me in among the trees. But I pressed well back, and after looking about a bit he went inside. I breathed easier and crept forward. It was beginning to grow dark now, and I couldn't see much, 'cause he didn't light no light. 'Twas jolly cold, too, hanging about up there. I was beginning to grow really bored when I heard someone else coming. He too seemed sort of furtive and kept looking all round, but he never spotted me."

"Good for you!" approved Desmond. "What was this chap like?"

"I couldn't see him proper, but he was short and stocky."

Lyntie and August exchanged glances.

"Not Splitshoe, then," August muttered. "He was tall and dark, wasn't he, Sid?"

"Yes, 'e was tall and thin. You couldn't call 'im short or fat."

"And it wasn't Mr. Marsh," mused Lyntie. "Go on, Jimmy. It's awfully thrilling."

"Glad you think so." Jimmy grinned, very much pleased with himself. "Well, this second fellow went up the steps and tapped on the door. Sort of special knock, I expect, 'cause he was let in at once. I couldn't hear nothing where I was, so I took the risk of getting close and listening. I crept up ever so quiet, and crawled right in under the caravan. There was plenty of room, and I could hear scraps of what they were saying."

"Coo! Just like a real 'tec," burst out Sid admiringly.

Jimmy preened himself,

"Course I couldn't 'ear *everything*," he admitted sadly. "But I did my best. Your man spoke up nice and clear, but Shorty had a soft sort of voice, more like a gentleman."

"What did they say?" asked Aprille eagerly.

"They was plotting something, I'm sure, but I don't quite know what. I've a sort of feeling 'twas a burglary, but I couldn't make out where. I thought first of Fairmeads, but I'm sure I heard Marsdale mentioned."

"Do you mean the place or the Manor?" Lyntie questioned. "That makes a lot of difference."

"That's what I don't know, Miss Lyntie. I tried real hard to get it, but I couldn't. I think it's to be soon, because they said something about it not being long before they'd be out of 'ere. I think Shorty was a bit nervous, 'cause he kept talking about risks, but the other chap didn't seem to take much notice. Laughed a lot, he did, and told him not to be a jellyfish or something."

"Did they mention the key we found?" asked Lyntie.

"I'm not sure, though they did raise their voices over something one of them'd lost, and Shorty called your man Jake. At least, I think that was it," Jimmy said honestly. "The short chap seemed awful scared, but not your old lag, Sid. He just stormed and growled a lot."

"You certainly got on to something, Jimmy, and we're grateful for every scrap of information," Desmond told him. "The point now is, what are we to do?"

"Split up and patrol Fairmeads and Marsdale Manor every night," suggested August. "Four of us to a house should be enough."

"Don't be a fool, 'August," snapped Aprille. "Even four of us can't do much against two armed men, and they are sure to be armed. Besides, we can't go without sleep for nights on end. Our people would soon notice if we yawned all day and had shadows under our eyes."

"Spring's right," agreed Desmond. "Besides, we don't know how many places we'd have to guard. If we keep this to ourselves and watch Fairmeads and Marsdale Manor, and then these crooks burgle another place in the district, we'd feel pretty awful about it, wouldn't we? I think we ought to tell Inspector Pentland what Jimmy's heard, and leave him to deal with it."

"Don't be so stuffy, Des," cried August hotly. "Surely we can manage a little thing like this without running to the police. I'm a match for Charlie Chubb any day."

"Maybe, but you haven't his authority," Desmond said quietly. "It isn't the individual who counts, but what he's got behind him. If *we* tried to tackle this, we'd have nothing, not even the permission of those in authority over us. Surely you see that, August?"

"No, I don't," 'August snapped crossly. "I certainly don't

want the police dragged in. They'll want to know the cat's brains of everything, and how will you explain our suspicions? They'll want to know what Jimmy was doing up here, and why he came, and I don't suppose his mother will be pleased if it gets to her ears, will she, Jimmy?"

"Rather not. If Mum finds out, the fat *will* be in the fire."

"I quite see that, Jimmy." Desmond still spoke quietly. "We need not drag you in if you'd rather not. Inspector Pentland will understand if we don't mention names, won't he, Lyn?"

"Of course. I agree with you, Des. I think he ought to be told. As you know, 'August, I'm all for adventure, and I adore mysteries, but I don't believe in talking like Robin Hood till you can shoot with his bow."

"I side with Lyn and Des," cried Aprille. "What about you, Sid?"

"I've no love for the cops," owned Sid. "But there are times when they're useful, and this is one of them. You can't expect Mark and Frank to stay up all night and work 'ard all day. That's two out of it, and Tilly's only a kid. She couldn't do much. I don't some'ow think Sir Bernard would like Miss Lyntie to run such risks, either, nor your dad you, Miss Aprille. If we're honest we'll 'ave to own the job's got too big for us. I'm on your side, Mr. Desmond."

"I suppose I am, too, if 'um needn't know what I've done," put in Jimmy.

"That's five to one, 'August," Desmond told him. "'Afrid you're in the minority. Shall I go and see the Inspector, or will you, Lyn?"

"I will, if you like. We understand each other pretty well, and I think I can make him see we're serious, without giving Jimmy away. As a matter of fact, he's coming to Fairmeads this afternoon! I heard Van say so. I'll waylay him as he leaves, and get him to do something. Wish we knew who Shorty is. The other fellow's pretty sure to be Old Lag."

"Do you think it would be any use going up to the caravan and hunting for clues?" asked Aprille, in an attempt to placate her brother. "You could walk back that way, couldn't you, Jimmy?"

"I could, but it's after twelve, and I'd better not be late for

dinner. Mum was grumbling because I wanted to be out this morning, but Dad said I deserved a holiday, and so I came. Still, I'd best be home early."

"Of course you must go, Jimmy. Cut along now if you want to," Desmond said. "There's no time to go caravan-searching before lunch."

"Not much use going at all if the police are taking over," muttered August grumpily. "It won't be *our* mystery any longer."

"Ass!" grinned Lyntie. "I'm not going to spill all Sid's haricots to the Inspector. I shall just tell him that we believe his burglars are using Margie's caravan as a meeting place, and that they are planning another *coup*. That'll be enough to get him and our dear Charlie on their toes."

Aprille burst into cascades of laughter.

"What on earth's up with her?" questioned Desmond.

"It's—it's nothing," Aprille gurgled. "I was just imagining our lethargic snail on his toes in ballet shoes and a short frilly, ballet skirt."

In spite of herself, Lyntie chuckled.

"You've a vivid imagination, Spring. You ought to write instead of *me*. P.C. Chubb as Prince Siegfried in *Lac des Cygnes* would bring down the house in both senses."

When Inspector Pentland was driving away from Fairmeads that afternoon, he was surprised to see a figure signing to him to stop. At first he did not realise it was Lyntie, but he obediently slowed down, in response to the repeated signals of the waving hand.

"Miss Lyntie!" he exclaimed. "Is something wrong?"
"Yes and no. May I get in and talk to you?"
"Certainly. Do you wish to talk here, or away from Fairmeads? I take it your business is private, since you've waylaid me in this surreptitious manner."

"It is rather private. You see, we Octocats have been doing a bit of sleuthing without anyone knowing, and we've discovered something we think you ought to know."

"Indeed? If I draw well into the side, we could talk as well here as anywhere, I think. Don't want folk to see us in close confab, do we?"

"Rather not! It'll be beautifully private here. First, you ought to know that we think we've discovered the headquarters of the burglars."

"That is indeed good news. Please proceed."

"You know Mad Margie, don't you, Inspector? At least, you know of her. She has a caravan up on the Downs between here and Bramleigh, in which she lives during the summer. In the winter she stays with her niece, and the caravan is locked up. But burglars are good at picking locks—they have to be—and one or more of them go to Margie's caravan to discuss plans."

"Do you know who these men are?"

"No. We believe one is called Jake, and one is short and stocky, but that's all the help we can give you. We think they are planning another burglary, to take place soon, but we don't know when or where."

"I see. I suppose I musn't ask how my colleagues got their information?"

"We'd rather you didn't," Lyntie told him. "We were in search of adventure, but we felt this was too big a thing for us. One wants expert help to combat dangerous crooks. I love excitement and thrills, but I love my uncle far more, and he mustn't be exposed to danger."

"Have you any reason to believe Fairmeads is the object of their next attack?"

For a moment Lyntie did not answer.

"Yes and no," she said at length. "You know, of course, that my uncle is a retired judge. He has made enemies, as men in his position do, and I've a feeling that there's someone about who wants to hurt him. Yesterday I met Mad Margie, and she hinted that my uncle was in danger. I don't know if it was just talk or not."

"What did she say?"

"She called him The Hugger, and said that many fear him, and hate him because they fear him. She told me to teach Rep to cry 'Murder, fire, thieves!' and intimated that my uncle should beware of his enemies."

"Probably just talk," said the Inspector. "Do you think it would be of any use if I interview her?"

"No," Lyntie declared decidedly, "She'd probably be scared

and dry up. Frankly, I don't think she knows anything definite, but she obviously suspects something. I know you'd rather have concrete evidence, but we haven't any. Yet our suspicions have a foundation in fact, and are serious enough, we feel, to warrant our bothering you with them."

"I shall most certainly act on your information, Miss Lyntie, and have the caravan watched. We will also keep a nocturnal eye on Fairmeads and other properties in the district, as far as is possible. By the way, has Rep learnt his piece yet?"

"Almost." Lyntie suddenly laughed. "He's got the 'fire, murder' bit, but so far *will* end up with 'Bless St. Bernard!'"

The Inspector chuckled.

"Why don't you leave him downstairs at night? He'd be as good a watchdog as Chubb."

"I will. It's an excellent idea. You'll be careful not to let my uncle suspect anything, won't you?"

Inspector Pentland nodded.

"Policemen are always discreet," he told her gravely, but there was a twinkle in his eye that Lyntie was quick to notice.

"You're a darling," she declared. "I feel quite happy now you've got your finger in the pie."

Chapter IX

HE THAT DOES WHAT HE SHOULD NOT SHALL FEEL WHAT HE WOULD NOT

"That you, Jake?" whispered a man's voice huskily.

"Course it's me. Who else do you think'd stand about in this weather waitin' for the likes o' you?"

"A cop, maybe," came the sulky answer. "Have you got a car?"

"Course I 'ave. Really, Bert, you are a muggins. Couldn't park it 'ere. The place is stiff with coppers and their narks,¹ as you know."

¹ Informer, police spy.

"That's what makes me so nervous," Bert groaned.

"Do you want a gun?" questioned Jake with a sneer.

"Oh, no. It's so much worse for you if you're carrying firearms and get caught. Besides, I could never shoot anyone."

Jake laughed nastily.

"You're losing your grip, Bert, me boy. Hope I 'aven't made a mistake in pickin' you for this job. Should be easy, 'cause I've used a chap I know to decoy the police away from The Hugger's. You owe 'im a bit, don't you? Always down on the likes of us, he was. Now we'll get a bit of our own back. He can afford to lose the contents of his safe. 'Ere's the car; get in."

Bert did as he was told and they drove off towards Fairmeads.

"Got plenty of bags for the swag, Jake?"

"There are four under the rug at the back. No use having more than two each, in case we have to beat it in a hurry."

"What about tools?"

"In another bag under the seat. I hope you haven't lost the art of safe-opening, Bert. You used to be one of the best peter-men¹ in the game."

"Oh, I'll manage that all right," Bert Hopgood bragged with returning self-confidence. "The safe that'll baffle Bert Hopgood has yet to be made."

"That's the tone," approved Jake Turner. "You've not been drinking lately, 'ave you, Bert?"

"Course not; why?"

"'Cause I'm curious to know who put the cops on to watching the caravan, that's all. Fortunately, I spotted 'em before they spotted me. The local swag-bellied flattie's² up there now. I saw him start off on his bike. Wants to lose a few stone before 'e can 'ope to catch anything quicker than a snail. He don't worry me. The only dangerous man's that tall Inspector bloke. He's got brains. Still, I'd rather be up against him than those kids that were prowling about in the snow. They might be the ones who found out about us using the caravan. As I told you, that key vanished, and I'm pretty sure I 'ad it up there. They've not been trailing round at night since the cops took over, have they?"

"I wouldn't be knowing. But the Inspector was up at the

¹ Safe-breaker, luggage thief.

² Policeman.

Manor to-night. Had a long confab with the new owner, and is still about up there. I saw him as I was slipping out."

"Did he see you?"

"Course not. I'm not as fat as his flattie."

"Can't see much difference," retorted Jake, with a laugh. "You could lose a bit without hurting yourself. Couldn't shove you through a pantry window these days."

"Just as well," Bert answered shortly. "Stopping here?"

"Yes. It's the best place. I've scouted round pretty thoroughly, and this is the nearest we can get the car with safety. I'll run 'er in under those trees, and then we can cross the road and get over the wall. Can you climb a tree?"

"Course I can. Wasn't I a cat-burglar in my prime?"

"Good. Then it should be easy. I told my chap to drop a few torn-up bus tickets by those trees if he got the policeman out of the way. Yes, here they are. Then up you go, Bert, me beauty. Soon we'll be seeing more money than you've handled in the last five years."

"How do you know the old chap keeps so much in his safe? He may use a cheque-book and bank his valuables."

"Not he. Besides, he was at the bank only yesterday, and he only goes about once a month, so there should be a good haul. Do get a move on!"

Over went Bert, much more lightly than could have been expected. Jake, after looking cautiously up and down the road, followed close on his heels. Noiselessly the two thieves crept through the grounds towards the house.

"Which is the window?" asked Bert.

"One of those round on the right. They're out of the way, which is all to the good," Jake told him. "All the same, get crackin'!"

In a very short time the two men were inside, and Bert was working on the safe, his hands encased in suitable gloves.

"Is it easy?" asked Jake, eagerly.

"I've known worse," Bert answered.

For a while they were both silent, as Bert skilfully manipulated his tools.

"Got it!" he exclaimed, as the door swung open. "It's pretty full," he went on, diving inside.

"Don't stop to look at the stuff," urged Jake under his breath. "Just fill the bags. The sooner we're away the better, and I know an East End fence as'll handle anything we can't ~~log~~."¹

"'Strewth, *there's* a bundle of notes, *and* I bet they aren't slush."²

"Course not. Beak-ganders³ don't need to work bad smash.⁴ Gosh, you've got me talking St. Giles's Greek⁵ now! Here comes the sparkle.⁶ Better put that in a bag by itself."

"That's a fine kitte and slang.⁷ Solid gold, I should say."

"It's eighteen carat, or my name's not Bert Hopgood. Pity it's engraved."

"Well, it's not difficult to christen a jack.⁸ Chuck it in. That all? Well, stuff up the bag with papers. They may be shares or securities, or something else of value. If not, we can burn 'em."

"There's some silver right at the back. Probably antique, and worth something. Got the other bag?"

Jake handed it over, and Bert began to pack in the silver. Suddenly both men were startled out of their wits by a voice commanding:

"Hands up, or I shoot! Hands up, or I shoot!"

With an oath, Jake made for the window, followed by an extraordinary agile Bert. Just as they reached it, a raucous laugh filled the room. Jake stopped dead in his tracks, and nearly fell over as Bert cannoned into him.

"Gawd, it's a parrot! Quick, Bert, fling something over the dratted thing before it rouses the house."

Turning, Bert seized a light foot-rug from the couch, and flung it over Rep's cage. The smothered cackling died away, and Bert passed his hand across his forehead.

"Many more shocks like that, and I'll become a parson," he declared. "I thought we were for it. Why, that bird's voice has the same sort of cold note that The Hugger's always had."

¹ Sell stolen goods not through a fence.

² Judge of the High Court.

³ Thieves' patter.

⁴ Watch and chain.

⁵ Counterfeit notes.

⁶ Handle counterfeit money.

⁷ Jewellery.

⁸ Alter name on watch.

"Like master, like bird," chuckled Jake, as he softly crossed the room and opened the door.

"Not a sound," he reported, closing it again. "We were lucky, Bert. Can't say I fancy a bullet in me leg. All the same, we may as well have the rest of the stuff in there. The bird's safe enough now, and no one heard him or us. Got your glim?"¹

"Yes, I hung on to that. Do you think it's safe to stay?"

"Course it is. No one's heard *us*, or we'd be hearing *them* by now."

But Jake was wrong. Someone *had* heard Rep's shrill warning. Vanessa had been to a dance with Valerie, and they had arrived home late, cold and tired. On entering her room, Vanessa had taken off her evening frock and lit the gas fire, then, slipping into a warm blue corduroy housecoat, she had pushed forward a low chair and sat down to warm her feet. It was cosy by the fire, and the book she had half-heartedly picked up proved interesting. One of the joys of holidays was late hours, followed, if desired, by late rising. In term-time Vanessa was always in bed by ten o'clock, for she loved her work, and was conscientious enough to know she must have plenty of sleep if she were to carry on successfully. Finishing a chapter, she glanced at her watch and regretfully laid down the book with a yawn.

"What was that?" she muttered, suddenly alert. Running to the door, she opened it and stood listening. "Surely that was Rep shrieking? Probably Lyn forgot to cover him up. I'd better go down and do it, or he'll wake the household."

She went softly along the corridor so as not to disturb anyone, and crept down the stairs.

"That's funny!" she murmured. "He's quiet now, and he isn't usually when he's not covered up. I suppose Lyntie had some mad idea about leaving him to raise the alarm if anyone broke in. What a curse that bird is!"

She paused, listening intently. Surely there were faint sounds coming from the library. She could not see if there were a light on in the room, because the door fitted too well, and it was covered inside by a heavy portière.

"I must peep inside," she whispered. "I've a horrid feeling that something's wrong. If I'm careful, no one will see me. I

¹ Torch.

don't want to sound the alarm till I'm sure, yet if I wait to wake Mason and the rest, the thieves, if any, will be gone. Once I know that there *is* someone there, I can ring the police."

Very slowly and absolutely silently, Vanessa stole forward. At the door she stood still, again listening intently. She was quite sure now that there was a sound of movement inside the room, but it might be Rep. How foolish she would look if she rang the police and they came to find only a parrot!

Putting her hand on the door handle, she began to turn it *very* slowly. Once it gave a faint click, and her heart stood still. At last she could push the door inwards, and she did so for a few inches. Unfortunately the curtain blocked her view, and she had to open the door still farther before she could move aside the portière enough to peep in. It was only with an effort that she stopped herself from gasping. The room was in darkness, save for the powerful beam of an electric torch which was focused on the now almost empty safe. There was a man crouching before the safe, and another was taking things as they were handed to him, and stuffing them into a bag.

Horrified, Vanessa began to close the door. Her one thought was to summon the police without the thieves hearing her. She wanted to hurry, but common sense told her that silence was even more important than speed. Inch by inch she pulled to the door. At last it was shut, though the handle gave a faint click just before she let go of it.

Without waiting a moment longer, she sped along the passage to the hall telephone, and seized the receiver. It was dark, and the switch of her torch jammed. She had turned it off before opening the library door, and now it would not come on. Impatiently she began to feel the dial and to count the spaces round to 9. Then her torch came on. But before she could dial the number she wanted, rough hands clutched at her, and dragged her away from the instrument. She swung round, flashing her torch on to the face of her attacker.

"*You!*" she breathed in amazement.

She opened her mouth to scream, but before she could do so a warm hand covered it.

"Quick, Jake, give us a hand," Bert called in low tones. "We can't risk leaving her here to raise the alarm."

Together the two men carried the struggling girl into the library and closed the door.

"Tie her up and gag her and leave her on the floor," suggested Jake. "'Strewth, she *can* kick!"

"I can't do that," moaned Bert. "She flashed her torch on me, and she recognised me."

"That's torn it. Well, we'll just have to take her along with us for a few days till we're safe away."

At this moment Vanessa broke away and made for the door. Jake struck out his foot, and she crashed to the floor and lay still.

"Good God, you've killed her, man," cried Bert, flinging himself to the ground beside the unconscious girl.

"Don't be a fool," snapped Jake. "She's only knocked herself out for a spell. She'll be kicking as lively as ever in a few minutes if we don't look slippy. Here, help me to tie her hands and feet with these. Know who she is?"

"The elder great-niece. Teaches at the big girls' school, I believe."

"Looks as though we're going to have a chance of paying back The Hugger more than we planned. I guess this bit of loveliness is worth more to him than the contents of that safe."

"Maybe, but I don't like it," declared Bert, shaking his head. "Burglary's one thing, but kidnapping's quite a different matter. You think I'm soft, I know, but I've never hurt a living soul yet, and Hugger or no Hugger, I don't want to start now."

"Oh, cheese it! If you hadn't been such a fool as to let the girl see your face, we needn't have taken 'er. Now we must. Leave 'er 'ere, and the police will be on our tails before we've had a chance to get away and make a bit."

"I suppose you're right, but it's a confounded nuisance, and I won't have her hurt. Understand?"

"Right, boss," sniggered Jake. "I'll be generous and let you take charge of her. You're in a position to do it. Look, she's coming to. Best tie up her head before she yells the place down."

"I haven't anything to gag her with," growled Bert, as Vanessa opened her eyes.

"Then we must take this rug and risk waking the parrot. If you're careful not to shine your torch on 'im, he'll probably not wake. Quick!"

Once again Vanessa was baulked. As she tried to shout, the folds of the rug enveloped her, and she could not even kick now.

"I'll carry the girl," said Jake decidedly. "If I leave 'er to you, you'll probably be afraid of pinching her, and get pinched yourself. I'll go on and get her into the car. You bring the swag. Can you manage?"

"Yes, yes," cried Bert, his courage ebbing. "I've had enough of this. I don't like having to take the girl. Every cop in the kingdom'll be out for our blood now."

"The Hugger isn't as important as all that," snorted Jake, hoisting Vanessa over his shoulder. "Get a move on, Bert. I'm off, and I can't wait about for you."

Jake disappeared into the foggy night, and Bert hastily collected his tools. As he went to pick up one of the bags of plunder, his torch flashed on Rep and disturbed him, for the next minute the bird's raucous voice was filling the air with shrill screams of: "Help, murder St. Bernard! Bless the thieves, help, murder! Help St. Bernard, murder! Rep's a thief! Fire! Fire!! Help, fire, murder, thie-e-e-yes!"

Terrified, Bert seized another bag and fled. He did not attempt to quieten the parrot. His nerve had gone, and his one impulse was to join Jake and make good his get-away.

Now that there was no one to quieten Rep, he just went on shrieking to his heart's content, saying all the things he loved best, which usually people tried to prevent him from saying.

Upstairs, Lyntie was sleeping soundly, for she was healthily tired after a normally strenuous day. She was dreaming of John Marsh. He looked just like a snowman, only he walked and talked. Gradually the snow grew less and less, and in its place Lyntie saw Sally Sudweek's frilled skirt. John Marsh dressed as Sally, and serving in her shop, seemed to Lyntie as funny as the sheep to Alice, and she began to laugh.

The next thing she knew, she was sitting up in bed, chuckling. As she really waked and stopped laughing, she heard another sound, one that sobered her instantly.

"Rep," she breathed. "Something's up."

In less than a minute she had dragged on her slippers and dressing-gown, and was hurrying noiselessly downstairs. As she neared the library Rep's cries grew louder and clearer.

"Funny," she mused. "Something's upset him, and yet there can't be anyone there, or they'd silence him. Unless—" She paused, her hand on the library door handle. "Perhaps they don't know how to," she mused, "or perhaps they've been frightened off. Anyway, it's up to me to investigate at once."

Without any of her sister's caution, Lyntie flung open the door with a flourish, and switching on the light, dashed into the room. For a moment she stood still, dumbfounded. Rep was shrieking enough for two, and she hastily found something to fling over his cage.

"Can't have you waking the house, old boy," she apologised. "It seems a scurvy way to treat a hero, but heroes often *are* treated badly."

Once the parrot was quiet, Lyntie looked round the room. She noted the opened empty safe, and the two bulging bags lying on the floor. Suddenly feeling cold, she shivered, and turning, she saw the open window. Crossing to it, she peered out, but the thickness of the fog prevented her seeing farther than a few yards.

"What a night!" she cried, putting out her hand to close the window. Then she paused. "Better not touch anything," she said. "Inspector Pentland won't thank me if I poach on his preserves. I'll leave everything just as it is, and ring from the hall phone." She went out of the library and back along the passage to the hall. "Thank goodness Rep's shrieking hasn't waked St. Bernard. I don't want him worried before the morning. He seemed so tired last night. And I expect Van and Val are tired, too, after their dance. I'll let them sleep. If I want any help I'll wake Sid. He's a host in himself. But now for the police."

She was just replacing the receiver when she heard someone coming, and looking up, she saw Mason descending the stairs.

"Is something wrong, Miss Lyntie?" asked the butler, who looked unlike his usual immaculate self. "I thought I heard noises, so I came down."

"Yes, Daybreak, there's been a burglary. I'm afraid the thieves have ransacked Sir Bernard's safe. I've phoned for the police. They should be here at any moment."

"Oh, Miss Lyntie, so they've done it, in spite of everything,"

cried an eager young voice, and Lyntie noticed Sid for the first time.

"What are *you* doing down here?" began Mason. "Go back—

"Let him stay," cut in Lyntie. "I need his help. Someone's got to guard that open window, and I don't want the police to rouse Sir Bernard when they arrive. Are you warmly dressed, Sid?"

"Yes, Miss Lyntie. I stopped to put on me big coat."

"Good. Then come along to the library. You, too, Daybreak, please. We can't talk much out here without rousing the others, and there's no need for my uncle or my sister to know what has happened till the morning."

"Yes, Miss Lyntie. Oh, what a mess! Whatever will the Master say? All the lovely old things from the safe—gone!"

"Not all, perhaps, Daybreak," said Lyntie, gently. "It looks as though Rep disturbed the blighters and they fled, leaving some of the stuff behind them. See those two bags? Let's hope they are stuffed with my uncle's favourite things. I bet the Inspector will be mad that this has happened under his very nose."

"Won't Master August crow!" said Sid from his stand by the window. "'E'll say this wouldn't 'ave 'appened if the Hoctocats 'ad been in charge."

"I don't think he will, Sid. He was against the police taking over, I know, but he won't say 'I told you so' now. He's much too good a sport to hit a chap when he's down."

"What on earth is Sid talking about, Miss Lyntie?" asked Mason.

"Nothing important, Daybreak," Lyntie answered. "Just a question of a difference of opinion the Octocats had. We'd better not touch anything, had we?" she went on, as the butler crossed the room and seemed about to pick up a chair that was lying on its side. "The police must have their innings before we can begin to tidy up. I wish the fire weren't out. It's cold in here with that window open."

"Here's the car coming, Miss Lyntie," burst out Sid. "I can see the lights."

"Then scoot out, intercept them, and ask them to be quiet. Will you open the front door, Daybreak? And don't look so sad.

Be thankful no one's been hurt. I'll wait here for the Inspector."

"Very good, Miss Lyntie," murmured the butler, and he padded to the front door in his warm Christmas slippers.

"This is a bad business, Miss Lyntie," observed Inspector Pentland, hurrying into the library. "Made a pretty clean sweep of that safe, by the look of it."

"Not as clean as they'd have liked," Lyntie pointed out. "Thanks to Rep and your suggestion of his being downstairs at night, the thieves were scared off before they were ready. They've left two bags there. I'm longing to know what's inside them, but I knew we mustn't touch anything till you were here."

"Wise of you to be so patient," muttered the Inspector, frowning. "I can't think what's happened to the chap I posted here to-night. He seems to have disappeared completely."

"It wasn't our dear old Chubb, was it?"

"No. He's up at the caravan. I can't say how sorry I am that this has happened, in spite of all our precautionary steps. Who is there in the house to-night, Miss Lyntie?"

"My uncle, of course, and my sister and her friend Valerie Marsden. Primmy—that's Mrs. Mason—Mason, Sid, and I, and of course the rest of the staff. Vanessa and Valerie came in late from a dance and are very tired. I didn't want to rouse them or my uncle. He doesn't seem too well, and he's expecting Mr. Lutwyche down in the morning on business."

"I'm sorry Sir Bernard isn't well, Miss Lyntie. Nothing serious, I hope. This will be a nasty shock for him."

Lyntie nodded.

"It will. But it won't seem so awful once the room is put straight. Mr. Lutwyche will be a help, too. He's always so calm and capable. I suppose most lawyers are—they have to be if they're to inspire confidence."

"Quite," agreed the Inspector absently. "Wouldn't you like to go back to bed now, Miss Lyntie? It's cold in here, and I can assure you we'll see to everything."

Before Lyntie could answer, Sid piped up.

"Would you like me to light a fire for you, sir? I've got the wood and paper 'ere, and I could 'ave a blaze in two shakes if you gives the word."

"Thank you. A fire would make our task much easier and

pleasanter. I'll get that window closed as soon as possible, too. It's a ghastly night."

Sid, beaming, busied himself at the grate, and Lyntie turned to the Inspector.

"I couldn't sleep if I went to bed, Inspector, and so I think I'll go and dress. I may be able to help you a bit. I know you'll let me do anything I can, because you realise how awful it is for me just to stand by doing nothing. Do you mind if I ring up Desmond Halliday and tell him what has happened? He always answers the phone at night, so it wouldn't disturb the Rector or Mrs. Halliday."

"You may certainly ring the Rectory, if you wish, Miss Lyntie, though I don't see how it can help. It's too late now for Mr. Desmond to help to do anything."

"All the same, I'd like to have him here. He's so sane and sensible, and he'll prevent me from doing mad things. Oh, good work, Sid. That blaze makes the room look more cheerful already. I think Rep deserves a special medal instead of being put to bed for his trouble."

"'E'll 'ave to be an hon'ary member of the Hoctocats now, Miss Lyntie, same as Miss Cynthia," grinned Sid. "'E deserves it for savin' those two bags and 'eaven knows 'ow much more."

"He certainly does. We'll have a meeting soon and initiate him. I know the others will agree. Why, there's someone arguing in the hall. Whoever can it be?"

Without answering, the Inspector crossed to the door, opened it, and looked out.

"Who's making such a confounded din out there? What, you, Chubb! Come in here and talk. Why on earth aren't you up at the caravan?"

"It was Clifton, sir. He told me to hurry back this way and see everything was O.K. here. Then, if it was, to find you and report. He's following a suspicious character over Bramleigh way."

"Who's following a suspicious character? Clifton?"

"Yes, sir."

"But what in heaven's name is he doing over Bramleigh way?"

"Following the man 'e saw leaving 'ere, sir."

"Leaving here!"

"Yes, sir. 'E—Clifton, sir—saw a suspicious-looking hindividual leaving the grounds here, and so he followed. The man went off towards the Downs and then on to Bramleigh. Clifton's still after 'im, but 'e sent me back 'cause 'e thought Fairmeads was more important to watch than Mad Margie's caravan. But it seems I'm too late, sir."

"You certainly are. Clifton's a thrice-confounded ass. As you're too late here, Chubb, you'd better cut off to Marsdale Manor and see everything's O.K. Don't rouse the house, but scout round and see no windows or doors are unfastened. Mr. Mortimer left about midnight for London. He likes night driving. Got your bike, Chubb?"

"Yes, sir. I picked it up on my way 'ere. I'll be getting along then, sir."

After Chubb had gone, Lyntie looked at the Inspector and laughed.

"I never thought you could be so brutal, Inspector," she chuckled. "Poor Charlie looked like a deflated balloon when he went off on what I'm sure you consider to be a wild-goose chase."

"Do him good," snorted the Inspector. "Not that I blame Chubb so much, but I'll have something to say to young Clifton when we meet. Now, Miss Lyntie, fire or no fire, cut along and dress. Sir Bernard won't thank me if you're down with pneumonia to-morrow."

"It's not quite so rapid as that," Lyntie giggled. "But I realise the police must always be obeyed. I'll be good and go, but not for long. Can I take poor old Rep up with me?"

Chapter X

NEVER SAY DIE; UP, MAN, AND TRY

"Have you finished in the library, Inspector?" Lyntie asked some hours later, when Inspector Pentland came out into the hall.

"Yes. You may have the room put straight now, if you wish. I have a few more phone calls to make, but I can do them out here."

"Just as you like. You will stay and have some breakfast, won't you?"

"Thank you. I'll own I'm hungry."

"A person will see to it, won't you?"

Miss Lyntie, and shall I give orders for the library
to be straight? The Master will want to go there directly he
comes down and hears what has happened."

"Please do. May I ring Mr. Marsh at Marsdale Manor and tell
him about last night, Inspector? He will be able to let Mr.
Mortimer know; he will also be prepared and better able to
guard the Manor."

"I had intended ringing through myself, but if you would like
to do it, I need not. Quite possibly friend Chubb will have roused
the household—unintentionally, of course—and told them what
has happened."

"You're a dreadful tease," said Lyntie, trying to look severe.
"You treat that poor man abominably. By the way, was there
much of value in the two abandoned bags?"

"There certainly was! One was packed with jewellery and
papers, while the other had silver and more stocks and shares or
something. Probably Mr. Lutwyche will be better able to explain
these to you than I can. When do you expect him?"

"About ten o'clock. He's an early bird, isn't he, Des?"

"Rather! I'm glad so many things of value have been saved,
Lyn. Rep deserves a V.C. Won't the Jeffersons be thrilled when
they hear what their Christmas present has done!"

"They *will* be thrilled. I haven't seen them for about a week,
but they're pretty sure to come when they hear the news. All
Eversley will know about our burglary before long. That's the
worse and best of a village. May we just go in and look at the
library while you're phoning, Inspector? We will join you at
breakfast."

"Of course. There's a good fire in there, and the window is
fastened up temporarily. We've also temporarily closed up the
empty safe. I thought it would shock Sir Bernard less if the place
looked normally tidy."

"Thanks. That was kind of you. Coming, Desmond?"

The two friends went into the library, which already looked
much more normal.

"The maids will be coming in to clean now," said Lyntie, glancing round. "Let's have a lesson in safe-breaking, Des, and see how they get the thing open."

"Can if you like. Are you thinking of embarking on a career of crime?"

"I may write thrillers later on if we're hard up. What on earth was that I stepped on? It nearly sent me flying."

"Looks like a bead," said Desmond, as Lyntie bent down to see what had rolled under the couch.

"It *is* a bead—one of Vanessa's." Lyntie sounded thoughtful. "That's funny," she muttered, more to herself than to Desmond. "I thought she was wearing this necklace last night when she went to the dance. In fact, I'm sure she was."

"Well, perhaps she broke it," Desmond suggested. "Girls always seem to be breaking their necklaces."

"Possibly, but how did it get in here?" questioned Lyntie, frowning.

"Perhaps Van came in here for a warm before going up to bed?"

"Not likely. The fire would be out by the time she got back. She'd be more cosy in her bedroom with the gas fire on. I'm puzzled, Des. Let's hunt and see if we can find more beads."

Obediently, Desmond got down on his hands and knees and peered under pieces of furniture.

"Quite a lot of 'em about," he told her, picking up all the little carved ivory beads he could find. "Jolly cute, aren't they? I've never seen anything quite like them before. Here are thirteen, Lyn."

"Are you superstitious, Des?" asked Lyntie, her voice flat, though sharpened with anxiety.

"Good Lord, no! Why?"

"Because I thought *I* wasn't, and now I believe I am. I've a ghastly feeling in my tummy. If anything's happened to Van, I'll—"

"Why work yourself up till you know?" cut in Desmond sensibly. "Run up to your sister's room with the beads. She'll probably blow your fears sky high. While you're gone, I'll have one more good hunt, and then I'll join the Inspector in the breakfast-room."

"All right. I'll come to you there," Lyntie said, running from the room.

In a few minutes she was down again, her face white, her eyes troubled.

"Inspector Pentland," she cried, "I can't find Van. She's gone."

"Gone! Where?"

"I wish I knew. When Des and I went into the library just now, we found some of her carved ivory beads on the floor. They'd run all over the place as though the string had broken. I couldn't understand how they got there, because Van was wearing them last night, and so I went up to her room. She's not there, and her bed's not been slept in. The gas fire was still on, and a low chair was standing close to it. Her evening frock was lying across the bed, and her housecoat's missing. She always kept it hanging on the door, so that she could slip into it easily without having to open her rather heavy wardrobe. I went along to Val's room to see if she knew anything, but she doesn't. She says Van said 'good night' and went into her room when they got back, like she always did, and—and she was wearing this necklace then."

The Inspector had risen to his feet, his face very grave, but he did not speak.

"You—you don't think she heard Rep and went down and was kidnapped, do you?" burst out Lyntie.

"I hardly know what to think," the Inspector answered. "Usually burglars who steal money and silver don't kidnap people, Miss Lyntie."

"But if she surprised them, perhaps even recognised them, they might."

The Inspector nodded gravely.

"It's possible, but by no means probable," he said slowly. "We must search the house and grounds. This is much more serious than I had thought. Could Miss Vanessa have slept in another room? Her hot-water bottle may have burst or something, and she might have preferred using a guest-room to rousing the house."

"I'll go and see," cried Lyntie eagerly, a faint note of hope in her voice. "A room is always kept ready, I know. Primmy insists. It's possible, Inspector, and I sincerely hope I find her."

But careful searching disclosed nothing. Vanessa had completely vanished. By this time Valerie had joined Lyntie and Desmond in the breakfast-room, but no one was attempting to eat anything.

"I can't see why these men should take Van, even if she *did* surprise them," declared Valerie.

"Can't you?" Lyntie's tone was hopeless. "Well, I can. If they hated St. Bernard, it would be a wonderful sort of revenge, wouldn't it? They would realise how much more Van must mean to him than money or possessions. There was evidently a struggle, and that's when the beads broke. They couldn't wait to find them because of Rep. It all fits in."

"But surely Van would be in their way," Desmond pointed out. "Her presence would hamper them, and might lead to their being caught."

"Revenge is a strange thing," mused Lyntie. "The thirst for it could make even practised criminals careless. Oh, Van, where are you?" Her voice broke, and Valerie slipped an arm round her.

"Don't give way, Lyn," she cried. "Remember, you must be strong for your uncle. He will need you and your strength when he hears what has happened. Thank goodness Mr. Lutwyche will soon be here! Where is the Inspector?"

"Using the phone in the library," Lyntie told her. "When he knew Van was really gone he just bundled the maids out of the room and began to ring up all sorts of people. If only those brutes had taken the silver and jewellery and left Van!"

At this moment the telephone ran, and Valerie hurried to see who was wanted.

Desmond turned to Lyntie.

"Don't despair, Octocat," he said bracingly. "It's time we took a hand again. *We'll* find Van, if the police don't, though I expect they will quite quickly. Pentland's no fool, and he's so mad with himself that he'll pull every string he can."

"I hope you're right, Des. It's funny, but I really have more faith in you and Sid than in the Inspector. Do you think I ought to go up to St. Bernard and break the news to him gently? He breakfasts in his room these cold mornings, you know, but he's always dressed by nine. I want to spare him all I can."

"I should think so. But here's Val. Let's ask her."

"Ask me what?"

"If I should go up and break the news to St. Bernard?" Lyntie said quietly. "It's my job."

"An excellent idea, and I'm sure the Inspector would agree."

"Was that call for him?"

"In a way, yes, Lyn. It was Dr. Pennrose-Eyre. He saw a car last night that he now believes must have been the thieves'. It was one of Jackson's taxis, but it was travelling at such a dangerous speed that it aroused the doctor's suspicions. Jackson has a name for careful driving, and what's more, he doesn't do night work unless in a very real emergency. When Dr. Pennrose-Eyre heard about the burglary here he immediately remembered that car. He rang up Jackson to make inquiries, and learned that he hadn't been out last night, but that one of his cars was missing."

"You mean stolen?" Desmond whistled. "Looks as though the thieves knew the lie of the land. Did you tell the Inspector that we thought the Jake man was the one who lodged near the Bardons?"

"No. Ought I to? When Mr. Lutwyche arrives, do you think we could go and see Mr. Marsh, Des? I'd like to talk to him first."

"It's a great pity Charles isn't here," burst out Valerie. "He's such a tower of strength, and always seems to know what to do. I wish there was something I could do to help."

"There is, Val, if you really mean it," Lyntie told her. "The Jeffersons aren't on the phone, and when they hear of the burglary, they're pretty sure to come on up here. Would you go and tell them about Van? We really don't want any visitors, and yet I'd hate them to have that long walk for nothing. I'll go up to St. Bernard now, and after that I must go and comfort Primmy. She adores Van because she's like Mother, and Daybreak told me she's taking it hard—Primmy, I mean."

"All right, Lyn. Did you get through to Mr. Marsh?"

"Yes, and he'll be glad to see us when we can get over there. I've told the Inspector, but he seemed preoccupied and scarcely took any notice. Just said that if Marsh was there *he* needn't

visit the Manor yet. I believe he's leaving men to watch it, and he'll go over to-morrow. When's Charles expected back, Val?"

"Not for two days, possibly three. Unless he returns when he hears about Van."

"He may, of course," mused Lyntie. "Try and eat some breakfast, Des. You must be hungry."

"I'll try, Lyn. Then I'll give the Monkeys a ring before ro^{ut} out Sid. He may have discovered something, or have^{an} idea. You know he's as quick as anything. Remember how he helped when Sir Bernard was missing?"

Lyntie nodded, and went slowly off towards her great-uncle's room. He would be alone now, probably reading his *Times*. She often went in to him at this time. Since a short bout of bronchitis in November, Vanessa had insisted on his not coming down to breakfast, and Dr. Pennrose-Eyre had supported her.

"Let the house be thoroughly warmed before you sally forth," the doctor had said. "At your age you can't take foolish risks. Think of the girls, and if you won't do it for your own sake, do it for theirs."

This argument had won the day, and Sir Bernard had meekly resigned himself to being what he called coddled.

As Lyntie reached the top of the stairs she saw Mason.

"Daybreak," she called. "I'm going in to my uncle. See we are not disturbed."

"Very good, Miss Lyntie."

Bracing her shoulders, Lyntie hurried to her uncle's door and knocked. A moment later she was kissing him good morning.

"Well, child, you look very serious this morning. What's wrong? Don't tell me that obnoxious bird of yours has died, or Tory has killed him."

"No, St. Bernard, darling, I'm afraid it's more serious than that. Thieves broke in during the night and rifled your safe. At least they meant to, but Rep disturbed them, and they left two bags of loot behind."

"Why wasn't I informed of this sooner?" stormed the baronet angrily, springing to his feet. "That fool Mason ought to be kicked out."

"It's not his fault," Lyntie explained. "I wanted you to have your breakfast before you were told. You see, that's not everything. Van's missing."

Sir Bernard sat down heavily, a stricken look in his eyes that Lyntie never forgot.

"So they've done it," he murmured, more to himself than to Lyntie. "I've heard so many threats in my day that I grew used to them and hardly listened. If anything happens to Vanessa I'll never forgive myself for bringing you girls here. I might have guessed my enemies would strike at me through you."

"Have you any idea who might have done this thing?" Lyntie asked gently, perching herself on the arm of Sir Bernard's chair. "It would help the Inspector a lot if you had."

"No, no; might be one of hundreds. Are the fools looking for Vanessa?"

"Of course they are. Inspector Pentland's doing everything possible. I only found out this morning that Van was gone. She must have heard Rep and gone down and disturbed the thieves. Personally, I'm not at all sure it was prearranged. Kidnapping 'Van, I mean. St. Bernard, darling, do you know a man called Jake?"

"Jakel! Can't say I do, off-hand. If they've left me my papers I could look it up. Why?"

"Because we think a man of that name is implicated."

"Probably not his own name," muttered Sir Bernard. "Those fellows have as many aliases as pairs of socks, or more. Why are you so sure Vanessa has been kidnapped? Mayn't she have just gone out?"

"Afraid not. You see, we found her broken beads—the carved ivory ones—all over the library floor. I don't mean the *beads* were broken, but the necklace. Van was wearing them when Valerie said good night to her last night, so how did they come to be scattered under the library furniture?"

Lyntie looked at her uncle, and was horrified to see how old he suddenly seemed.

"Please don't look like that, St. Bernard, darling," she begged. "It mayn't be as bad as we fear. It's possible that Van frightened off the thieves, and then gave chase and hasn't yet got back."

"Vanessa wouldn't do that," said Sir Bernard firmly. "She is always thoughtful, and she would have rung through before this, if she were hung up somewhere."

"There's a car," cried Lyntie, dashing to the window. "Oh, it's Mr. Lutwyche. Will you come down to him, or would you rather see him up here?"

"I'll come down. This is not the time to give way, child. Go down and inform Mr. Lutwyche of what has happened, and tell him I'll join him in the library almost at once."

With a swift kiss, Lyntie ran silently from the room. Tears were pricking her eyeballs, and she blinked rapidly as she sped down the stairs. She reached the hall just as Mason admitted the family lawyer. She welcomed him, and then turned to the butler.

"Is the Inspector still in the library, Daybreak?"

"No, Miss Lyntie. He left the house about five minutes ago. He said he would ring up or return within the hour."

"Thank you. Will you come into the library, please, Mr. Lutwyche? I've something to tell you before you see my uncle."

"What's wrong, Lyntie? Sir Bernard is not worse, is he?"

"No, but he's just had a terrible shock. When I broke the news to him, I saw him grow visibly older before my eyes. It was awful. You see, we had a burglary here last night. The thieves ransacked the safe over there, but not content with that, they kidnapped Van."

"Kidnapped Vanessa!" exclaimed the lawyer, startled out of his usual calm. "Poor Sir Bernard! No wonder you say he's had a shock. Tell me everything, Lyntie."

Obediently, Lyntie did as she was asked, and Paul Lutwyche's legal brain swiftly grasped the whole situation, in spite of various gaps in Lyntie's story. His dark eyes seemed to read Lyntie's thoughts, acting like magnets. When she had finished talking, he just sat quite still. Then his charming smile suddenly lit up his usually serious face, and his low, musical voice broke the silence.

"Chin up, Lyntie. Isn't that an Octocats' cry? You and your friends did good work once before and found Sir Bernard. Now it's up to you to help the police and find your sister. Sometimes private individuals can gain information that would never be

given to the police. I suggest that your society meets and that you put your heads together. It is possible you may find clues, if some local character is implicated. Remember the old saying: 'Never say die; up, man, and try.'

"Thank you, Mr. Lutwyche; you've been a tremendous help," Lyntie said with a tremulous smile. "I knew you would be, and I'm so grateful you're here to help my uncle. Can you stay?"

"Of course. First things first, and I think Sir Bernard's need is the greatest claim on my time at the moment. If I may just phone my clerk, he will see to everything else for me. I may be able to arrange a meeting with Mr. Mortimer while I'm here. I have various matters to discuss with him."

"I'm afraid he left for London during the night, but I've phoned Mr. Marsh, his agent, and he has promised to let him know what has happened here. I expect Charles will soon be back."

"Good. They've had no trouble at the Manor, then?"

"Not so far, and I shouldn't think they would now, with half the police in England on the qui vive. Even hardened crooks and criminals have a respect for the law when it's roused and on its toes, haven't they?"

"I'm sure they have. Your sister is no fool, Lyntie, and I'd back her wits against those of any ordinary thieves. We can only hope and pray, for every...dy's sake, that Vanessa will soon be back at Fairmeads. Ah! Here is Sir Bernard."

Leaving the two friends to greet each other, Lyntie slipped away, eager to find and comfort poor Mrs. Mason. As she ran up the stairs, she saw Sid disappearing along the passage to his room.

"Sid," she called. "Do you know where your grandmother is? I want her."

"I expect she's up in the linen room," Sid answered, turning and coming back to meet Lyntie. "That's where she usually goes when she wants to be alone. No fresh news, I suppose, Miss Lyntie?"

"'Fraid not, Sid. I wish there were. Haven't you any ideas?"

"Not any that's much good," Sid replied miserably. "I've been

talking to Mr. Desmond, and 'e suggested I went up and 'ad a look round the caravan. As I pointed out, it was left alone last night when Mr. Chubb come back 'ere, and they may 'ave put Miss Vanessa in there."

Lyntie frowned.

"It is *just* possible," she agreed. "But I hardly think it likely if they used a car. It would mean leaving the car while they carried her up there, and they'd hardly want to do that."

"Not unless one of 'em's a local and stayin' up there," suggested Sid.

"Too risky. They'd know the place was under police observation."

"That's just it, Miss Lyntie," Sid burst out eagerly. "You often miss what's right under yer nose. They might know Mr. Chubb's—well—Mr. Chubb, and they might 'ave dumped Miss Vanessa under the bunk or somewhere. Anyway, I can't do no good 'ere, so I may as well go and 'ave a look."

"Rather!" agreed Lyntie. "And good luck, Sid. Mr. Desmond and I are going over to the Manor this morning to see Mr. Marsh. He might be able to help. If he is Splitshoe, he knows Old Lag, and Old Lag is probably Jake. I think *if* he knows anything, Mr. Marsh will tell me."

"That's a fine idea, Miss Lyntie. Will the Hoctocats be meeting after you get back?"

"I think so. Probably at Miss Cynthia's. We can't leave her out. That is, unless I'm wanted here. I can't bear to be far away, unless there's a phone, because there may be news at any minute."

"I'll cut along now," was all Sid said, but his eyes told Lyntie all *he* could not. "Unless you or Mr. Desmond tells me different, I'll be outside Miss Cynthia's at three. O.K.?"

"Quite. Good-bye, Sid."

Lyntie walked on up the next flight of stairs to the linen room, and opening the door softly, crept in. She saw Mrs. Mason standing by the window gazing out across the grounds, tears coursing down her cheeks.

"Don't, Primmy, dear," she breathed. "It's awful for all of us, but we mustn't give way."

"Oh, Miss Lyntie, love, I can't believe it! Not Miss Van!

When Mason told me, I thought at first it was a sort of poor joke. Then I saw his face, and I knew. Miss Van's so like her darling mother, my Miss Angel, and *she* found unhappiness at Fairmeads."

"Well, Van hasn't done that. Her unhappiness and ours is because she's left Fairmeads," Lyntie pointed out. "My uncle is being very brave, and you must be, too, Primmy. It's up to you to keep things going here and help Miss Marsden all you can. I have to go to the Manor, and be at the Inspector's beck and call. Fortunately, Mr. Lutwyche is here with my uncle."

"That is good, Miss Lyntie. Sir Bernard couldn't have anyone better with him. The two gentlemen are such old friends. I hear Mr. Mortimer is away."

"Yes, and I want to find out when he is expected back. Mr. Marsh promised to phone him and let him know about Van; so I shall probably hear when he's returning if I go over there. The maids seem scared and need your supervision, Primmy. They are inclined to talk in corners."

"Indeed! We'll soon see about that," declared Mrs. Mason, forgetting her sorrow in her sense of duty, as Lyntie knew she would. "I'll be down, Miss Lyntie, and I'll try not to give way again if I can help it."

"That's the spirit! Perhaps my sister will be back again before the day is over," said Lyntie, with far more confidence than she really felt.

Ten minutes later, having left instructions to phone her at once if there were any fresh news, Lyntie set off with Desmond for the Manor.

"Do you know if the Inspector has been over to the Manor this morning?" asked Desmond, as they cycled along towards Marsdale.

"I don't think so. Why? I told him I was going, and he didn't say he was. As you know, he said he needn't phone if I did."

"That's what I understood, but I thought I heard him tell the driver of the police car to go to Marsdale Manor."

"Funny!" Lyntie shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps they've found a fresh clue or something, and want to question Mr. Marsh. You don't think he's implicated, Des, do you?" cried

Lyntie in horror. "I like him so much, but there is some mystery about him, isn't there? We don't know for certain that he isn't Splitshoe."

Desmond frowned thoughtfully, and increased his pace to keep abreast of Lyntie.

"Do you think the police have discovered about our finding him in the snow?" he asked.

"Anything's possible." Lyntie sounded tired. "But I won't believe my nice John Marsh is a crook," she added vehemently. "He hasn't got shifty eyes or—"

"Lyntie, have you ever thought that he dyed his hair?" interrupted Desmond. "I'm sure he does. It's heaps darker than it was."

Lyntie nearly fell off her bicycle in amazement. "*Et tu, Brute!*" she exclaimed. "Honestly, Des, do you think he's—he's not straight?"

"I wouldn't say that, and he must have satisfied Charles, or he wouldn't have engaged him. I was only just wondering if he had been in trouble at some time and didn't want to be recognised. If that is so, the police might have got on to him. I'm not saying he's had anything to do with Van's disappearance—I'm quite sure he's not that kind of rotter—but—oh, I don't know!"

"Neither do I, but I mean to find out," said Lyntie grimly. "I wish Charles were at home."

"I expect he will be soon," soothed Desmond. "Here we are at the lodge. Do you want me to come with you, or would you rather see Marsh alone?"

"Oh, you come, too," Lyntie begged him. "All these horrid suspicions have made me feel quite nervous of Mr. Marsh. Perhaps he won't be in."

But he was. Jevons showed them into the morning-room, where a bright fire burned, and John Marsh joined them a few minutes later.

"I didn't expect to see you this morning, Lyntie, even though you phoned. Can I do anything to help?"

"We're not sure," Lyntie told him seriously. "But we *are* sure you will if you can. First, were you wearing split shoes when you arrived here?"

"Split shoes!" John Marsh sounded bewildered. "I—I really

don't remember. My shoes *were* old, so much so that they were burnt, but I don't think they were split. Why?"

For a moment Lyntie looked nonplussed.

"I thought if they were, you might know a man called Jake, and be able to help us. We think Jake was implicated in last night's business."

"Good heavens! You seem to know an awful lot. I'd like to help you, but I'm afraid I can't. Mr. Mortimer will be back to-night or early to-morrow, and I *must* see him before I say anything to anyone."

"I see. Has Inspector Pentland been here this morning?"

"Yes, just a routine inquiry. He's calling again to-morrow to see Mr. Mortimer. Why?"

"Oh, we just wondered."

"Do—do the police know about your Jake?"

"Hm—hm." Lyntie was non-committal. "Silence is golden, isn't it, Mr. Marsh? Two can play the same game. Good-bye."

"Lyntie, wait!" ordered John Marsh peremptorily. "You surely don't think me guilty of kidnapping your sister? Why, you saved my life, and I'd be worse than the meanest skunk if I repaid you with ingratitude and treachery. Will you believe me if I swear to you that I know nothing about last night's dastardly business?"

Lyntie's eyes grew softer.

"Yes," she said simply, "I believe you. But frankness would be worth more than protestations of innocence. Still, if you are bound to keep silent till you've seen Mr. Mortimer, there's nothing more to be said. Come, Desmond, we will go. *Au revoir*, Mr. Marsh."

"You're a strange kid, Lyn," Desmond observed as they rode down the drive. "You handled Marsh magnificently. Usually you're such an infant, but to-day you seem quite different—almost grown-up."

"I *am* different," Lyntie said seriously. "You see, I'm up against something really big—bigger even than finding St. Bernard—and I've *got* to win through. I'm fighting not only for myself, but for St. Bernard and Van; for *her* very life, maybe."

Chapter XI

HOPE IS AS CHEAP AS DESPAIR

Not long after Lyntie and Desmond left for Marsdale Manor, Valerie set off for Thistle End, where the Jeffersons lived. She did not want to be away from Fairmeads long, and so she borrowed Vanessa's car. All the way to the Jeffersons, her thoughts kept returning to the previous night. How lovely Vanessa had looked, and how full of life she had been! They had laughed and chatted all the way home, such a few short hours before. Suddenly Valerie saw Mrs. Bardon, the twins' mother, plodding along ahead of her, and guessing she was bound for Thistle End, she accelerated and then stopped the car beside her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bardon. Can I give you a lift to Thistle End?"

"Well, that *is* good of you, Miss Marsden. My feet do play me up, and I'll be glad of a ride. I hear you've been having trouble up at Fairmeads," she went on, climbing in beside Valerie. "I needn't say how sorry I am. Was much stolcn?"

"I hardly know yet. The thieves were disturbed, and so some of the contents of Sir Bernard's safe were left behind."

"That's good hearing. Mr. Chubb's only just in, and he wouldn't talk. He lodges with me, you know, miss. That tired he is, you wouldn't believe. But I made him eat a breakfast before going up to bed. That's what's made me late. But Mr. Jefferson won't mind. Nice gentlemen, him and his nephew. How's the young ladies?"

"Miss Lyntie is naturally very much upset," Valerie told her. "You see, Miss Dimsdale is missing."

"Missing! Miss Van! How? When?"

"We don't really know yet, but we fear she disturbed the burglars and was kidnapped."

"May her good angel watch over her, then, the dear young lady! It's terrible news, Miss Marsden. I had no idea that Miss Van was stolen along of the valuables. More precious than all of

'em to the Master and Miss Lyntie, I'll be bound. 'Tis indeed a sad day for Fairmeads and for Eversley. No wonder Chubb wouldn't talk. Warned not to, I'll be bound. Oh, poor Sir Bernard! And poor, poor Miss Lyntie!"

"It is a specially anxious time for them, but they are very brave. Here we are at Thistle End. I'll leave the car here."

"Thank you for the lift, miss, but I'd have gladly walked, not to have heard the sad news of Miss Vanessa. Mr. Tony's seen you, miss. He's waving."

Valerie waved back, and a moment later she was hurrying up the path to meet Tony.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of this early visit, Val?" he asked. "I thought you'd sleep late after the dance, I did."

"I might have done if something hadn't happened at Fairmeads last night," Valerie answered. "Is your uncle in? If so, I'll tell you both together."

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" Tony sounded politely concerned. "You're terribly serious."

"I am," Valerie told him, as she went into the front room, where Wilfred Jefferson was busy at his easel. "Good morning, Mr. Jefferson. I'm sorry to disturb you so early, but I've bad news for you. Lyntie thought you ought to know that Fairmeads was burgled last night."

"Good God!" muttered Tony. "Much stolen?"

"Vanessa."

"What!" The artist instantly sprang to his feet, brushes and palette scattering all over the floor. "Vanessa kidnapped?"

"We fear so. Would you like to hear the whole story?"

"Yes, yes. Please sit down and tell us. Perhaps there is something we can do."

"I'll begin at the beginning, and tell you what we imagine must have happened. Vanessa had slipped off her evening dress and put on her housecoat, and the gas fire in her room was lit. I think she was probably sitting near it, warming herself, when she heard sounds from below—possibly Rep. She went down and was caught by the thieves, who took her with them."

"But why?" burst out Tony. "She'd be in their way."

Valerie shook her head.

"Lyntie thinks Van may have recognised one or more of the men, and so they were afraid to leave her behind."

"What a ghastly business!" exclaimed Wilfred Jefferson. "Poor little girl!"

"Poor Lyntie, and poor Sir Bernard!" cut in Tony. "It's awful for them. I'm sure Sir Bernard would rather have lost all his valuables than Vanessa. How is he?"

"I only saw him for a moment. Mr. Lutwyche is with him."

"That's good. He needs a friend of long standing at a time like this. Is there nothing we can do?"

"I think not, Mr. Jefferson, thank you. Inspector Pentland was on the spot almost at once, thanks to Rep and Lyntie. She heard the bird and went down, and so the alarm was raised much earlier than it would otherwise have been."

"Trust Lyntie not to lose her head." For a moment a smile curved Wilfred Jefferson's mouth. "She and her Octocats will probably find Vanessa while the police are talking and unwinding yards of red tape."

"I don't care who finds her, so long as she's found," declared Valerie. "I hate to think of her in the hands of those ruffians. Lyntie's gone to the Manor."

"Why? I thought Mortimer was going to Town last night," said Tony.

"I believe he's gone, but Lyntie wanted to see Mr. Marsh. She and the Octocats know or guess something, I think."

"Something to do with John Marsh! I wonder!" Tony frowned. "I suppose Mortimer's been told and will come back."

"I believe so."

"I think I'll go to the Manor to-night and scout round a bit, in case he doesn't make it till the morning. I don't know this Marsh fellow, but I rather trust Lyntie's hunches. Has she told the police of her suspicions?"

"I believe so," Valerie repeated, almost mechanically.

"Police!" snorted Wilfred Jefferson contemptuously. "If Chubb's anything to judge by, even Tony would make a better watchdog. Why, the fat fool came here once to arrest a drunken donkey!"

'At any other time Valerie would have laughed, but to-day she could not even smile.

"Inspector Pentland isn't like Lyntie's lethargic snail," she said. "He's a clever man, is Brian Pentland. Well, I'll be getting back now, but Lyntie wanted you to know that she considers Rep a hero."

"A hero! Possibly a murderer," growled Wilfred Jefferson. "Didn't that obnoxious bird bring Vanessa downstairs, right into the thieves' arms?"

"But he also roused Lyntie, remember, Uncle," cut in Tony Jefferson. "Pentland was quicker on the spot, thanks to Rep. Good-bye, Valerie. It was good of you to come. Shall I see you to your car?"

"Thank you. Good-bye, Mr. Jefferson. Don't hesitate to ring up if you're anxious for news, but I expect Mrs. Bardon will be kept well informed by her son, and will be eager to pass on her information."

"I'll keep an eye on the Manor to-night, Val," Tony declared, as he held open the car door for her. "Don't worry too much, my dear, and tell Lyntie that hope is as cheap as despair."

Lunch was a strange meal at Fairmeads that day. Eating was a duty nobody enjoyed, and after a few vain attempts at conversation, Mr. Lutwyche lapsed into silence. Then, half-way through the meal, Mason came in to say that Inspector Pentland wished to speak to Miss Lyntie on the phone.

In a few minutes Lyntie was back. As she entered the room, the others looked up expectantly.

"They've found the car," she said. "It was abandoned just outside London."

"Did they get any clues?" asked Sir Bernard.

"The Inspector didn't say, but he sounded fairly cheerful."

"If the lugubrious Pentland is cheerful, good news *must* be on the way," declared Paul Lutwyche. "They know now that the thieves have made for London."

"If we only knew whether they'd taken Vanessa with them!" murmured Sir Bernard wearily. "They may have hidden her somewhere near here."

"If they have, we Octocats will find her, St. Bernard," Lyntie vowed grimly.

"You and your Octocats!" murmured Sir Bernard disparagingly.

"You believe in us, don't you, Mr. Lutwyche?"

"Of course, Lyntie. Being a lawyer, I judge by results," came the quick answer.

"It's a good thing somebody believes in us," Lyntie said to herself as she pedalled along the road to Blenheim Lodge. "I only hope Cynthia has some ideas. I need bucking up. If I begin to lose faith in the Octocats, we're sunk."

When a sympathetic Mackintosh showed Lyntie into Cynthia's room, only Desmond was there.

"Hullo, Lyntie, dear. I'm so glad you've come," Cynthia greeted her warmly. "I'm sure if we all put our heads together, we'll think of something. Are the other Octocats coming?"

"The Monkeys are," Desmond told her.

"So is Sid. At least he said this morning that he'd be here about three. Tilly was coming, but she suddenly suggested going to Bramleigh and contacting her cousin Jimmy. Of course I agreed. Jimmy's a cute kid, and may be a help. I haven't seen Frank to let him know about the meeting, and Mark was afraid Muzzle would keep him busy all the afternoon. I interviewed Muzzle and told him I wanted Mark for an hour, so he'll be here round about three, too."

"Splendid!" cried Desmond. "There's the bell. That'll be the Monkeys, I expect. Shall I go, Lyn, and save poor Hydrotite's legs?"

"Please, Des."

Almost at once, Aprille and August came in with Desmond. They greeted Lyntie normally, much to her relief, and at once plunged into possible schemes for catching the thieves.

"I vote we split up and go round the neighbourhood making inquiries," proposed August. "People might tell *us* what they won't confide to the police."

"I was going to suggest getting Jimmy to work with us," Aprille said. "I'm glad Tilly's already doing that."

"There's the bell again," cried Desmond, hurrying off.

This time he returned with Sid and Mark.

"Glad you've made it, Mark," cried Cynthia. "Find pews, both of you."

"Anything to report, Sid?" asked Lyntie, noticing an excited look in her protégé's eyes.

"Well, Miss Lyntie, I went up to the caravan like I said I would, and there was a cop 'angin' about. But I give 'im the slip and got inside. The police must 'ave forced the door, because it was open. There weren't no signs of Miss Vanessa anywhere. I 'ad a job gettin' away unseen, but I managed it," Sid giggled. "I'm used to the London cops, and they're a sight more slippy than the ones down 'ere. By the time 'e 'ollered, I was 'alf-way to Bramleigh."

"Don't you take to crime, Sid," warned Desmond. "If you do, we'll never catch up with you."

Sid winked broadly.

"It's an excitin' life, Mr. Desmond, but I think I prefer the Hair Force."

"Wizard prang!" applauded August. "But go on, Sid. What happened next?"

"Well, I doubled back on me tracks and slipped down hoff the Downs near Marsdale. Then, seein' as 'ow I was in that part o' the world, I thought I'd 'ave a good look round the Manor. Just in case, you know. I wasn't poachin', Miss Lyntie, strite I wasn't, and I knew you'd already been there, but—well, you couldn't snoop round same as me."

"I hope you snooped to some purpose, Sid," remarked Desmond.

"I'll say I did. Look!"

Pulling his hand out of his pocket, Sid displayed something round and small and white.

"One of Van's beads!" exclaimed Lyntie excitedly. "Oh, Sid, where *did* you find it?"

"In the Manor grounds, Miss Lyntie, not so very far from the side entrance. I shouldn't 'ave been so near the 'ouse, only that Rudge chap come along and I 'ad to beat it in the wrong direction. It was lyin' just where the grass meets the path. I scouted round for a bit, but there weren't no more."

"That looks as though someone at Marsdale Manor's in it," mused Cynthia. "I hope it's not your nice John Marsh, Lyn."

"Who else could it be?" demanded August.

"Rudge," cried Aprille, seeing the look on Lyntie's face. "A man who would shut up an old woman for no reason whatever, could do anything. Perhaps he's got Van at the East Lodge."

"If so, her bead wouldn't have been found near the house, Spring," Desmond pointed out, "unless it was planted there to lead us up the garden path."

Lyntie shook her head.

"I don't believe the men realised about the beads. In any case, they wouldn't know Van still had any. Perhaps she managed to grab a few, or perhaps some slipped inside her clothes and dropped out later."

"Do you think there might be more?" asked Aprille, eagerly.

"I don't know, but it's possible. I vote we organise search parties and go bead-hunting," proposed August. "You could tell Mr. Mortimer about the one Sid's found, Lyn, and then he'd let us search anywhere we liked. Or will you tell Inspector Pentland?"

"I don't know." Lyntie sounded bewildered. "What ought I to do, Des? I do want to do what's best for Van."

"Of course you do. I advise waiting till to-morrow and seeing Charles. If he says tell the police, tell 'em! if not, we'll search like blacks till we find Vanessa."

The rest applauded this suggestion, and Lyntie looked relieved.

"That's what I wanted to do," she owned. "I'm glad you all feel the same about it. In any case, it'll soon be dark, so we couldn't do much out of doors to-night."

"Will you be able to stay for tea?" asked Cynthia eagerly. "If so, perhaps you'd let Nanny know, Des."

"I'm afraid I'll have to be going, Miss Cynthia," Mark said regretfully. "Mr. Muzzle told me to hurry up."

"Nonsense!" declared Lyntie. "Leave Muzzle to me. You can go when you've had tea, can't he, Cyn?"

"Of course. We'll have it at once."

"Will you let Frank know everything, Mark?" asked Lyntie. "When will he be home?"

"He's sure to pop in this evening, Miss Lyntie, and I'll find out if he's heard or seen anything. Much as he loves his work, he's felt a bit out of things up at the farm. Perhaps now he'll be able to be useful. He'd *love* that."

"I'd love something to get *my* teeth into, if only that something weren't Van," cried Lyntie. "Still, the sooner we get our teeth

into *this* business, the sooner we'll have Van home. Can anyone suggest what we ought to do first?"

"Organise a bead-hunt," said August promptly. "We don't know that the bead Sid found was dropped by accident. Perhaps Van tried to leave a trail for someone to find, like the kids in the fairy tale. Anyway, I vote that as many of us as can should get to the Manor in the morning and begin our search."

"That should be easy if Charles is home," said Lyntie. "He'll be very ready to let us hunt. He'll probably help us, unless he has something else he must do."

"I wish I could do something to help," sighed Cynthia.

"The very fact that we can meet here is of the greatest help, Cyn," said Desmond quickly. "I simply don't know what we'd do without you and Blenheim Lodge."

But in spite of their decision, the Octocats were not the first to reach Marsdale Manor in Vanessa's cause. That evening, instead of going to bed, Tony Jefferson quietly left Thistle End, and set off for the Manor. He was determined to do all he could to bring Vanessa's kidnappers to justice. Never having met John Marsh, he had no idea what he was like, but if Lyntie suspected him, that was enough for Tony. It was a dark, cold night, and Tony hurried along to keep himself warm.

"Wish I'd brought my bike," he muttered, as he floundered in a hole and splashed himself.

It seemed a particularly long way to Marsdale that night, and as Tony had not been there before, except in a car, he found the going long and wearisome. But at last the main lodge loomed up ahead. There seemed to be no one about, and as there were no gates to bar the way, Tony crept inside. The sound of a door opening behind him sent him scurrying into the bushes. It was too dark to see who had come out of the lodge, but Tony guessed it to be a man. The shadowy figure began to walk up the drive, and directly Tony deemed it safe, he followed. Then the man turned abruptly left and disappeared. Afraid to use his torch, Tony could not hope to keep up with someone who obviously knew his way about, and so the sailor decided to get near the house and watch from there. If necessary, he could circle the building, and with luck, he would be aware of anyone attempting to approach. Suddenly he heard voices, and he paused to listen.

He involuntarily smiled when he recognised the first speaker as P.C. Chubb.

"I'm your relief to-night, Gorton. You cut along and 'ave a mouthful of what you fancies, and a spell of shut-eye."

"Right you are, Chubb. It's as quiet as the grave up here. Quite gets on your nerves. I can't think why Inspector Pentland sends us up here now the trouble's over. They aren't likely to come back to these parts in a hurry, specially since they took the girl."

"You speak properly about Miss Dimsdale, me lad," admonished Charlie Chubb. "But I agree our sticking about here's probably a waste of time. Do they know inside that we're here?"

"No, Keep it secret, he says, so we don't even get a drink on the sly. So long, mate. Good hunting!"

Smiling to himself, Tony continued his patrol. He did not think he had much to fear from Chubb. But who was the other night watcher? Could it be the lodge-keeper, out on legitimate business? But what business was 'legitimate at night?

For two hours Tony prowled round the house. Occasionally he had to sidestep to avoid Chubb, but it was pretty obvious that the policeman had no wish to be seen himself, for he kept well out of sight. Then, just as Tony, cold and hungry, was cursing himself for undertaking a thankless task, which two other people were already carrying out, a car swerved round a corner, and picked him up with its lights. Before he could move, it stopped, and a man sprang out, commanding him to stand still unless he wanted to be shot.

"Mortimer, old man, where did you spring from? I never heard your car coming."

"Jefferson! No, I ran her on the grass and switched off the engine. I usually do from here to the garage, because the ground slopes downwards, though as a rule I use the path. What are you doing here?"

"Just keeping an eye on things for you."

"But where are Marsh and the butler, Jevons?"

"Inside, for all I know. Probably both sound asleep. But Lyntie had a hunch that someone here knew about last night's business, and so I came to watch. I believe she suspects Marsh."

"But that's nonsense. I know Marsh better than any of you, and I'm sure he's a white man. He may have been weak in the

past, but he isn't now. No, you'll have to look elsewhere for your kidnapper. Seen anybody about?"

"Only the famous Charlie Chubb. He's on guard, secretly, I understand, from which I gather Pentland has his suspicions, too."

"But it's absurd!" expostulated Charles Mortimer. "Poor old Marsh! It's high time I got back, by the look of things."

"There's someone else abroad, too. A man, I think, from the lodge. He turned off to the left, half-way up the drive."

"Rudge! Now he's a much more likely customer. Sullen sort of chap. I'll just run this car in, and then we'll go inside and have a drink. Foul night. Black as pitch. How are the folk at Fairmeads? Seen anything of Val?" he went on, as Tony joined him in the car.

"Yes, she came to Thistle End this morning, and told us about Van. She's taking it hard, poor kid. I'm desperately sorry for Sir Bernard, too, and poor old Lynzie. She's a grand kid."

"She certainly is. I must see her first thing in the morning. Don't make a noise. No need to rouse the house and scare the maids into hysterics."

"Chubb might shoot us out of hand," chuckled Tony.

"They wouldn't trust *him* with firearms. He wouldn't be safe with anything more deadly than a water-pistol. Though, frankly, I think he's less stupid than you people imagine. He's slow, but he's damn sure. I like the chap."

"So do I. Shall I get out and open the doors?"

"Thanks. I don't mind if you do, as Sid of the Octocats would say. Now we'll soon be inside. I'm longing for a stiff whisky and soda."

"Sounds good to me," approved Tony. "But won't the door be locked?"

"I told Marsh to see it wasn't, in case I got back before morning. No, it's all right."

As Mortimer pushed open the door and crossed to switch on the light, Tony entered in time to see the butler, fully dressed, on the stairs. Turning, Charles also saw the man.

"What on earth are you doing up at this hour, Jevons?" he asked.

"Just keeping an eye on things, sir. I understood you might be

back, and I thought you might care for some coffee, sir. I couldn't sleep with the front door unbolted. Not after last night, sir."

"I see. Nervous, are you?"

"Well, not exactly, sir. But with you away, I felt sort of responsible. Will you have coffee, sir?"

"No, whisky and soda. Is there a fire anywhere?"

"In the library, sir. I kept it in, in case you came. I'll fetch the drinks, sir. Will the other gentleman be having whisky and soda?"

"I don't mind about the soda," grinned Tony Jefferson.

"Where's Mr. Marsh?" asked Charles Mortimer.

"In bed, sir, I presume. He went up as usual. I'm afraid he isn't too fit, sir."

"Oh! What's wrong?"

"N-nothing you can name, sir, but he seemed sort of upset, and looked tired and pale."

"Not unnatural after his recent illness. He needs sleep. You'd better doss down here for the rest of the night, Jefferson, and I'll run you home in the morning. I don't suppose there's an empty bed ready. Will the couch here do?"

Had Charles Mortimer only known it, there *was* an empty bed at Marsdale Manor that night.

Chapter XII

TALL TREES CATCH MUCH WIND

Moodily, John Marsh rose from his chair and crossed the room. It was still rather too early for bed. When it grew dark at tea-time, the evenings seemed unending, unless one had pleasant companionship. Especially now that his thoughts were tormented. Where was Vanessa Dimsdale? What had happened to her? Of course the police suspected him of being mixed up in this affair. That was only natural. Or was it Jevons they wanted to keep an

eye on? The Inspector had shown pretty plainly that he was not satisfied. He had left, vowing to come back early the next day, or directly Mr. Mortimer returned. There were police watching, he felt sure, in case he—John Marsh—tried to bolt. As though he would! It was always foolish, as well as useless, to defy men like Brian Pentland,

Restlessly Marsh wandered out into the hall and crossed it. He would go and talk to Jevons. Force him to confess, if he *had* anything to confess. Purposefully John Marsh strode to the butler's pantry and entered.

"Did you want something, sir?" Jevons asked respectfully.

Marsh saw that the butler was not alone. In a chair by the fire sat Samuel Rudge.

"Only to tell you not to bolt the front door to-night. Mr. Mortimer may be back before morning, and he wants to be able to get in without rousing the household. I forgot to tell you earlier."

"Very good, sir. Will you be wanting anything more to-night?"

"No, thank you. I think I shall turn in early. Good night."

Feeling frustrated and annoyed, John Marsh went back to the hall. Suddenly he saw something that made him pause and blink. Just under a heavy oak settle was a small round object. His heart was thumping as he stooped to pick it up. It was a carved ivory bead. Lyntie had told him about Vanessa's broken necklace, and for a moment he stood there, trying to fight the wave of fury that engulfed him.

"So she *has* been brought here, to this very house!" he muttered. "Oh, what can I do? What ought I to do?"

His first impulse was to rush back to the butler's pantry and denounce Jevons. But what would be the use? Rudge might be in the racket, and the two men could make things awkward for him. Wearily, Marsh dragged himself back to the library and slumped in an easy chair. For some minutes he sat staring at that small carved object; then, with a sigh that ended in a groan, he slipped it into his pocket and leaned back, his eyes closed.

This was far, far worse than anything he had imagined. He had feared Jevons might be mixed up in a burglary, but he had felt convinced the weakling would never be a party to such a crime as kidnapping. Ought he to ring up Inspector Pentland and

tell him everything? He half rose, then sank back again. Surely his first loyalty was to Charles Mortimer, the man who had given him his chance. He would be back by morning, and a few hours could make little difference. He finally decided to confide fully in his employer, and leave him to tell the police all he thought necessary.

Having reached this decision, John Marsh felt slightly comforted. For some time he sat on, dreaming of the past—his carefree boyhood, his weakness, his time in prison. He had been a fool once, and that made him understand others who were weak. He could have forgiven Jevons for burglary, even though he had stolen from Fairmeads, but the fact that he had touched Lyntie's sister, Vanessa, was beyond forgiveness.

It was after midnight when John Marsh finally went up to bed. When Jevons had come to lock up the library for the night, he had said nothing to the butler about the bead he—Marsh—had found, or his suspicions. The two men were palpably uncomfortable in each other's presence, and Jevons had hurried away as soon as possible.

It was when John Marsh was in his room, preparing for the night, that a new thought struck him.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "The cellars! No one knows of the two secret ones beyond those under the Manor, no one save Jevons and me. Can Vanessa be there?"

He slipped on his coat again and hunted for his torch. He *must* find out. If Vanessa was down in those damp cellars, she should not stay there a moment longer—not even if he *were* accused of having kidnapped her. Better spend his whole life in prison than that Vanessa, sweet, gracious Vanessa, should be in the hands of those rufians.

"I wonder if the old spring still works?" he muttered, as he crossed the room and noiselessly opened the door.

Everything was still and quiet. For a moment John Marsh stood listening; then, satisfied that no one was about, he began to creep along the passage.

"Perhaps I'd better take some brandy with me," he thought, as he reached the hall. "I'll slip on my overcoat, and stick a half-bottle in my pocket."

In the dining-room Jevons had left a pile of wrapped chicken

sandwiches. With a twisted smile, Marsh annexed them and slipped them into the other pocket.

"They might be useful," he thought. "And probably Vanessa needs them far more than Charles will on his return. And now for the cellars."

The Manor was a rambling old house, and it took John Marsh some time to reach the cellars. When he finally entered the third cellar, and walked to the secret panel, he saw it was far less dusty than those round about. His spirits rose. A light wooden fruit-stand had been carelessly placed in front of it, but it did not take John a minute to move it.

"Now for the secret," he muttered. "Three feet down and six inches from the outer edge. Here we are! Now I must press upwards and push inwards at the same time."

A grinding noise greeted his efforts, and the rather clumsily constructed panel began to move. It made so much noise that Marsh did not hear stealthy sounds behind him, and did not see a frightened yet furious face peeping in at him.

"Are you there, Vanessa?" John called softly. "It's me, John Marsh. I've come to find and rescue you."

No answer greeted this cry, and having fixed back the panel, Marsh anxiously crept through into the dark cellar beyond. He shone his torch round, but could see nothing. Thinking he heard a movement, he called again, involuntarily taking a step towards the next cellar. As he did so, the panel behind him rumbled to with a thud. Too late, John Marsh realised what was happening. He rushed back to the entrance, and tried to open the panel, but all his efforts were in vain. He was a prisoner in the secret cellars!

The next morning Charles Mortimer was roused by Jevons.

"What's the big idea, waking me at this hour?" growled Mortimer.

"It's Inspector Pentland, sir. He wishes to see you and Mr. Marsh. I've been to Mr. Marsh's room, but he's not there."

"Not there? Then I suppose he's downstairs or in the grounds."

"I've looked everywhere in the house, sir, and two policemen are searching the grounds. Perhaps you ought to know, sir, that his bed wasn't slept in last night."

"What! I thought you said he wasn't well and went to bed early?"

"So I understand, sir, but——"

"Oh, clear out. Tell the Inspector I'll be downstairs in five minutes. Ask him if he's had breakfast, or if he'd like a drink. Is Mr. Jefferson up?"

"Yes, sir, he is talking to the Inspector."

"All right, I'm coming."

In less than five minutes, Charles Mortimer was downstairs. He found the Inspector in an anxious and irritable mood.

"What's this about Marsh having flown?" he snapped out, as Mortimer entered the room.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean. Who says Marsh has flown?" Charles demanded.

"Well, he's gone, hasn't he? Suppose he guessed I'd seen through his rather stupid answers yesterday, and beat it during the night. I feel a thrice-confounded fool. I should have guessed he was mixed up in this business at Fairmeads, and arrested him on suspicion."

"Have you any proof, Inspector, that my agent *was* implicated in the recent outrage?" demanded Charles Mortimer coldly.

"Of course he is. It's as plain as the palm of your hand. Why else has he disappeared? Perhaps you don't know that your precious agent has done time under another name."

"I most certainly do. He did not come here on false pretences."

The Inspector looked slightly taken aback, and Tony Jefferson grinned inwardly. This battle of words amused him.

"Then all I can say is, you ought to have informed us that you were engaging an ex-convict to run your estate."

"Why should I? Marsh had paid the penalty of his crime, and the past was over and done with as far as I was concerned. I am not responsible to you or any man for my actions. If I wish to employ men who have done time, I am free to do so."

"I thought you were a friend of Sir Bernard Allardyce."

"I am. Perhaps you do not know, Inspector, that it was his great-niece, Lyntic Dimsdale, who brought John Marsh to this house."

"What!" The Inspector sounded incredulous. "Miss Lyntic brought the kidnapper of her sister here?"

"Be careful what you say, Inspector. Have you definite proof that John Marsh broke into Fairmeads, rifled Sir Bernard's safe,

and finally abducted Miss Dimsdale?" Charles Mortimer's voice was icy. Yet it was obvious to Tony Jefferson that he was only keeping his fury in check by a supreme effort. "Even ex-convicts can sue police inspectors for libel, I presume."

For a moment there was silence, so intense that it could be felt. Then the Inspector apologised.

"I am sorry, Mr. Mortimer, if I said anything to offend you. I can appreciate and sympathise with your loyalty to your cousin."

"My cousin! What on earth do you mean, man? Why talk in riddles?"

"But I—I thought you knew who John Marsh was. I understood he had confided in you. Frankly, we have only just caught up with him. He'd changed his appearance as well as his name, you see, but there is no doubt that John Marsh is really your cousin Jeremy Marsdale."

Charles Mortimer sat down heavily.

"I just don't know what to say," he burst out. "I hadn't the foggiest idea. Poor old chap! I suppose he longed for the old place, and was trying to reach it when he collapsed in the snow. I must see Lutwyche at once. This place should belong to Jeremy, if he's alive, and not to me. He's the son of the elder child, the son. I am only the daughter's child."

"I know nothing of that, Mr. Mortimer, but you will be able to question Mr. Lutwyche. He is at Fairmeads with Sir Bernard."

"Good. No wonder Jeremy seemed to know the house so well. It's surprising no one recognised him."

"Hardly," said the Inspector. "He never left the grounds, did he? And he dyed his fair hair dark. That changes one surprisingly."

"Do you honestly think, Inspector, that my cousin Jeremy is mixed up in this dastardly outrage?"

"I don't want to, and I was far from sure yesterday—that is why I waited for your return before I did anything—but now—"

"You feel his flight condemns him?"

"Yes. Innocent men don't run away."

"True. But we don't know yet that he *has* run away. He may have been taken ill somewhere. He has scarcely recovered from

his recent illness. With your approval, I will send for Jevons and question him."

"An excellent idea," approved Inspector Pentland.

But the butler seemed powerless to help them. He answered their questions, but impatient Charles Mortimer soon dismissed him.

"It's obvious he knows nothing," he declared. "He just can't find Jeremy, and that's all there is to it. By the way, Inspector, I'd prefer my cousin's incognito to be kept for the present. I know I can rely on Jefferson's discretion. I shall, of course, tell Lutwyche and Sir Bernard, but beyond that, he is still John Marsh till he chooses to disclose his identity. I feel sure you are barking up the wrong tree, Pentland, and I sincerely hope my cousin and I will be able to prove it."

"I hope so, too. How long have you had your butler? Is he another lag?"

"Good Lord, no. He came to me with excellent references, Why?"

"Nothing. I just thought I'd seen him before somewhere."

"May I say something?" asked Tony Jefferson, speaking for the first time. "I don't know if it'll help, Inspector, but Jevons is remarkably like Farmer Hartwell at Barrow Farm."

"Thanks, Mr. Jefferson. I can see the likeness now you mention it. That's probably why his face seemed familiar. Now I must be going. I'm afraid I must circulate a description of John Marsh. He's a wanted man, but in England everyone is innocent until *proved* guilty and convicted, Mortimer. You ask Sir Bernard."

"I will. I intend to go to Fairmeads at once. If I run you as far as that, can you get home from there, Jefferson?"

"Rather! But isn't it too early to pay a call? Why not have some breakfast first?"

"An excellent idea. I'm too impetuous." Charles laughed. "Sure you won't join us, Pentland?"

"I wish I could, but a policeman's work is never done. John Marsh *must* be found, innocent or guilty."

It was not quite ten o'clock when Charles Mortimer arrived at Fairmeads. He was warmly welcomed by Valerie.

"I'm *so* glad you've come, Charles," she declared. "I'm sure things will go better now you are here. Would you like to join

Sir Bernard and Mr. Lutwyche in the library, if they're not too busy to see you? Here's Lyntie. She'll probably know if you'll be welcome in the library, and if so, take you there."

"Oh, Charles, it's lovely to see you. I've so *many* things to ask you. But first, do come in and see St. Bernard."

"Glad you're back, Mortimer," said Sir Bernard. "Lyntie seems to think you and your agent will be able to help us. I sincerely hope she's right."

"Of course I am. If Charles can only make Mr. Marsh speak out plainly, we'll get somewhere, I'm sure. Yesterday, when I saw him, he said he couldn't talk till he'd seen you. I hope he's ready to do so now, and put the Inspector on the right scent."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Lyntie, but I haven't seen my agent since my return."

"Not *seen* him?"

"No. He's disappeared."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Paul Lutwyche. "That looks bad."

"It not only looks, but is," declared Charles Mortimer. "I've seen Pentland this morning, and he's out for the poor chap's blood. I feel I owe it to you, Sir Bernard, to explain a few things. I took Marsh into my employ knowing he had been in prison. We colonials don't worry much about that sort of thing if we feel a man's straight. I trusted Marsh, and I don't believe he's let me down. There's something behind all this, and I hope it won't be too long before we get an explanation."

"You—you mean you think Mr. Marsh knew too much, and has been spirited away?" asked Lyntie shrewdly.

"I hadn't thought of that, but it's an idea, Lyntie. It may interest you to know, particularly you, Lutwyche, that John Marsh isn't John Marsh, but Jeremy Marsdale, my cousin, and the rightful owner of Marsdale Manor."

"What!" exclaimed Lyntie, dancing up and down in her excitement. "Mr. Marsh is really Jeremy Marsdale?"

Sir Bernard said nothing, and Mr. Lutwyche merely removed his spectacles and tapped his knee with them while he regarded Charles thoughtfully.

"I am right, Lutwyche, am I not?" Charles asked.

"Not altogether." Mr. Lutwyche spoke very deliberately. "I knew your cousin was alive, though I had no idea he was at the

Manor. His being alive makes no difference to your ownership of the Manor, Mortimer. When Jeremy got into the wrong hands—it started when he chummed up with a local youth against your grandfather's wishes—your grandfather disowned him. When he was sent to prison—you judged the case, I believe, Sir Bernard—his name was deleted from old Mr. Marsdale's will, and yours substituted, Mortimer. Mr. Marsdale was free to do what he would with the property, as it is not entailed, so the fact that Jeremy Marsdale is alive makes no difference."

"I see. Well, these are matters that can wait. First we must try to find Vanessa and Jeremy. Have you no clues?"

"*We have,*" cried Lyntie. "We found one of Vanessa's beads in the Manor grounds. May we have your permission to seek for more?"

"Certainly, if you think it will help."

"Of course it will. Van was wearing this particular ivory necklace when she was kidnapped. Consequently she or one of her kidnappers must have been near the Manor since the night before last."

"Is there no end to the shocks I must suffer to-day?" demanded Charles Mortimer. "Why ever did I decide to go away just now?"

"I am sorry to hear about Jeremy's disappearance, Mortimer," said Sir Bernard slowly. "I always liked the lad. He may have been weak, but he was not vicious. His grandfather didn't understand him. If the boy's parents had lived, he would never have appeared before me."

"If only I knew whether Jeremy knew Jake!" murmured Lyntie.

"Jake who?"

"Another old lag, Mr. Lutwyche. At least, Sid thinks he is, and Sid's not given to imagining. Jake was at Mrs. Cox's over Christmas."

"Have you told the Inspector about this man, Lyntie?" asked Sir Bernard.

"Yes, what I know, which is practically nothing. Jeremy knows more, and now he's gone. Oh, what a ghastly muddle!"

"Lyntie, your uncle looks tired," said Charles in low tones. "Would you like Mr. Lutwyche and me to go into another room for our business talk?"

"It would be wise," Lyntie whispered back.

In a few minutes Lyntie and her uncle were alone together, except for Lyntie's black cat, Tory, who had perched himself precariously on Sir Bernard's knees. Lyntie crossed to them, and sat down on a tuffet at her uncle's feet.

"St. Bernard, darling, do you think Van's somewhere near here all the time?"

"I don't know, child, and it's the uncertainty that's killing me. Why did I ask you girls to live with me? I should have known that tall trees catch much wind,"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that, Lyntie. Vanessa is suffering because I once held a powerful position of responsibility and trust."

"You don't *know* that," Lyntie argued, gently stroking Tory's ears. "Personally, I think Van wasn't part of the plan at all. She just got in the men's way at a critical moment, saw too much, and suffered in consequence."

"You may be right. Please God we shall know soon," murmured Sir Bernard.

"We shall, I think. I feel much calmer to-day than I did yesterday. I *can't* believe John—Jeremy is a rotter. If he's gone of his own free will, he's not bolted from the police, but is probably following some clue. He may find Van for us, and then—well, I'd even let him marry her, since he can't have the Manor."

"And where do you suggest they should live?" asked Sir Bernard dryly.

"Why, here, of course. I suppose Fairmeads will be Van's some day—some *very* distant day, I hope."

"And you? Where will you live?"

"Oh, in a London garret, I expect. Authors are usually poor and struggling—that's if they're any good. Miss Lethbridge is rather an exception, isn't she?"

"She's certainly an exceptional woman," agreed Sir Bernard. "Lyntie, dear, I know I laughed at you and your Octocats the other evening, but really I judge by results, like Lutwyche. You found me all right, and so I hope you are doing all you can to find Vanessa. But don't tell *anyone* who John Marsh really is, will you, Lyntie?"

“Of course not, if you don’t want me to, St. Bernard. After all, darling, it’s not so much Jeremy that we Octocats want to find as Vanessa. We’ll try to bring her home to you *very* soon. No one would hurt Van. It’s just a question of time before they free her, or we find her. Tory, don’t pad Great Master’s knees. He knows you love him without that. Keep your prickles to yourself. Don’t grieve so, please, St. Bernard. And get it out of your precious head that *you’re* to blame. Perhaps if we’d stayed at Storm Cottage, we’d both have been murdered in our beds.”

All that day investigations were carried on, with no results. Everyone was searching for someone. The Inspector wanted John Marsh. P.C. Clifton longed to find the man he had tracked to Brighton, lost, and been sent back to find. The Octocats thought only of Vanessa and how they could discover her whereabouts.

That night, when it was dark and silent, a short stocky figure stole down to the Manor cellars. In his arms Jevons carried food and drink for his prisoners. Where he neared the secret panel he put the food down and opened it with his left hand, in which he had a torch, while he covered the opening with a gun.

“Keep back,” he ordered, “or I’ll shoot. No one would hear the shot right down here under the earth.” There was no answer. Still holding his gun, Jevons crept into the first cellar and flashed his torch round. “Fools!” he muttered. “Why do they go into that damp end cellar when they have this nice dry one? Marsdale, here’s food for you. Come and get it. But remember I’ve a gun, and I’ll shoot if you try any funny business.”

Still no answer. The cellar was as silent as a tomb. Beads of perspiration began to gather on the butler’s forehead. Where could his captives be? He *must* know. He went back to see that the panel was firmly fixed, and then he returned to explore the second cellar. It was empty.

“They’re gone!” he croaked. “Gone! But how, and when, and where? There’s no way out, save through the panel, and that’s not been opened, I’ll swear. No one knows the secret ‘cept him and me, and it can’t be worked from the inside. Strikes me if they’re gone, I’d better go, too. And the sooner the better. There’s nowhere for them to hide. Not a crack or a crevice. I’ll push the food in, and get away as soon as ever I can.”

Half-running, half-walking, Jevons went back through the

panel. Hastily stuffing the food and drink into the first cellar, he closed the panel and tried it. Then he replaced the wooden fruit-stand in front of it, and fled.

Back in his bedroom, the terrified man hastily packed a small case. Putting all the money he had into his wallet, he slipped it into his pocket. Then he went to the cupboard and took from it a bottle of whisky.

"Better have a nip. 'Twill steady my nerves. And they need steadyng. I never wanted to have the girl here. I knew no good could come of it. But Jake insisted, and what was I to do? Now I must go. The police may come at any minute. Where's my gun, and—"

He paused on the threshold and turned back into his room. Finding a piece of paper, he wrote:

"Marsh and the girl in the end cellar, beyond the house cellars. The entrance to it is behind the wooden fruit-stand. Marsh is really Marsdale, and he and I are the only ones who know the secret of the cellars. We found it as boys. Now he's in there—or was—with her. I may be a thief, but I'm not a murderer."

He did not sign the message, but as he went downstairs, he slipped into the library and put the folded paper, addressed to Mr. Mortimer on the mantelpiece. He did not know that as he left the room the paper fluttered to the floor and lay hidden behind a heavy old chest standing near the wall by the fireplace,

Chapter XIII

HOPE IS GRIEF'S BEST MUSIC

When John Marsh heard the panel close, his heart sank. He realised that he must have walked right into a trap. That panel had been deliberately closed behind him, and only one person could have closed it—JEVONS. It was obvious that he—Marsh—knew too much and had been got out of the way. But where was

Vanessa? Marsh cursed himself for his lack of foresight. Instead of rescuing her, he had merely become a prisoner himself. After vainly trying for a few minutes to open the panel, Marsh turned away.

"Thank goodness I brought that brandy and those sandwiches!" he muttered. "Now I'm here, I may as well have a look round the second cellar."

He walked through to the small cellar, beyond the one he was in, flashing round his torch as he went. But at the entrance he paused, scarcely able to believe his eyes. In one corner, on a bed of rugs and cushions, Vanessa lay, fast asleep. Shielding his torch, Marsh crossed to her side and looked down at her. She was smiling in her sleep, and looked so comfortable and contented that Marsh felt more kindly disposed towards Jevons. On a box not far from the bed were the remains of a meal. In one corner burned a small stove, and an unlit lantern hung from a nail in the wall. For an instant, Marsh longed to wake Vanessa and talk to her, but he resisted the impulse and stole softly away.

"Let her be happy while she can," he murmured. "When she wakes, we will have some sandwiches and brandy." He laughed inwardly, for it seemed such a queer meal.

As though aware of his presence, or perhaps because the torch flashed across the small cellar, Vanessa opened her eyes. Instantly the smile faded.

"Who are you?" she demanded imperiously.

Swinging round, John confronted her with a smile.

"Your fellow prisoner, John Marsh. For my sins I am being rewarded by being imprisoned with you. But don't worry. Soon we shall be out of this hole. Jevons can't keep us here indefinitely. He may be clever, but I know him; he's weak, and he'll crack once the police get on to him. They got on to me, so it won't be long before they place friend Jevons."

Vanessa looked puzzled.

"I—I don't understand," she said, frowning. "Won't you light the lantern and put out that torch? It's blinding."

"Sorry. I was so delighted to see you, I quite forgot." Marsh laughed boyishly. "I was just going to creep away and prepare a weird meal for us while you finished your sleep. Hungry?"

"Not very. Jevons has looked after me pretty well. He's not a bad chap. The one I feared was Jake Turner."

"You're right. Jake *is* a nasty piece of work."

"You know him?" Vanessa sounded surprised.

"Yes. I'm not all you think me, I'm afraid. I've done time, too. Charles Mortimer knows."

"Well, then you've paid for what you did, and so it can be forgotten. I suppose you knew too much and Jevons shut you in here while he got away."

"Not exactly. I suddenly remembered these cellars. Jevons—or shall we call him by his proper name, Bert Hopgood?—and I used to play here as kids. He was a lot older than I, and I admired him tremendously. His mother's second husband was the then Farmer Hartwell at Barrow Farm. He and his stepson Bert never got on well together, and when the Hartwells had a son of their own, poor Bert felt more and more of an outsider. It made him bitter, because he considered that as the elder, he ought to inherit. But it was soon obvious that everything would go to William. Both parents adored him—he was a decent enough chap—and that made Bert reckless. He and I used to get up to all sorts of mischief, and once or twice we were in serious trouble. Grandfather never understood, and I drifted away from him into the arms of Bert and his chums. He knew a gang in Brighton, and— But we need not discuss him or me now. How are you?"

"Feeling hcaps better since you came. I've slept a lot, because I fell and hurt my head a bit. It made me quite silly for a while. I came to in the car, and directly I knew I was being brought here I tried to think of some sign I could leave to show everybody where I was. But my hands were tied, and I could do nothing. Then, just as they were carrying me to the house, I managed to dislodge a bead that had stuck in the front of my housecoat. It fell in the grass, and they did not notice. There was one more bead in my collar or somewhere, and when Jevons put me over his shoulder to carry me down here, it rolled out in the hall. I thought he was going to find it, because he looked round, but he was evidently in too great a hurry to dispose of me to stop and hunt. The necklace broke when Jake tripped me at Fairmeads."

"The brute! I found the hall bead, Vanessa, and that's how I knew you were somewhere here. I remembered these cellars,

and I've just remembered something else. I believe I can get you away from here without anyone knowing. I shared the secret of these two unknown cellars with Bert, but one day, when we'd had a quarrel, I discovered a passage leading from *this* cellar to Marsdale Church. I never told anyone of that. If the roof hasn't fallen in, we can escape that way."

"Oh, John, how marvellous! Can we go at once?"

"Directly we've had these chicken sandwiches, and some brandy to warm us. I shall have to go first and see if it's safe. If it is, you shall come, though heaven alone knows how we'll get out of the church. They only have a service here about once a month—everyone goes into Eversley—and there are no bells."

"Don't let's worry about getting out of the church till we get into it," advised Vanessa, with a flash of high spirits. "I'd rather be anywhere than in this underground cell. I've tried to be brave, but I'm scared stiff of rats. I only put the light out when I went to sleep, in case it wouldn't last after I had waked. These sandwiches are good, John. How clever of you to bring them!"

"Yes, wasn't it? By the way, Vanessa, my name's not John Marsh. That's just an alias. I'm Jeremy Marsdale."

For a moment the full implication of this disclosure did not strike Vanessa. She just smiled and began to make some polite rejoinder. Then her whole expression changed.

"Jeremy Marsdale!" she gasped. "Then you belong here! Are you related to Charles?"

"I am his first cousin. I had to tell *you*, but please keep my secret. Charles may not want folk to know. I'm not much to be proud of."

"Rubbish! Charles isn't like that. He'll welcome you home, as we all shall. He'll probably suggest your staying on as his agent, and you will, and you'll both be happy. Really, this adventure is ending well. I only hope Uncle Bernard and Lyntie aren't worrying too much."

"I think Lyntie and her Octocats are hot on your trail," Jeremy told Vanessa. "She was here yesterday, bombarding me with questions. They've found out I know Jake—I can't think how—and they'll probably be waiting for us in Marsdale Church when we emerge there."

Vanessa laughed.

"Good old Lyn!" she cried warmly. "She won't take this lying down. She thrives on adventures, and I dare say Rep is the hero of the hour. He certainly roused me, and as I found his rug—or rather the one the thieves had flung over his cage—half-smothering me when I came to, he probably roused the household after I'd been taken away."

"Only Lyntie, I believe, and Sid and his grandfather. Your uncle knew nothing till the morning."

"I'm glad. He's old and none too well. I'd hate him to be ill because of me, and worry can make people ill."

"I know. Have you finished? Then I'll try and find the passage. I've almost forgotten where to hunt. It must be on that wall and near the end."

For a long time Jeremy searched in vain. Vanessa was beginning to grow quite desperate when suddenly he found the swinging slab of stone and moved it back far enough for them to crawl through.

"Stay here and hold it open while I explore, Vanessa, will you? Get the lantern first, and hang on to it. I have blocked the stone, but it's wise to be on the safe side. Are you warm enough, or would you like my coat?"

"Rather not. I'll take a couple of rugs in case I'm cold later. At the moment excitement is warming me right through."

"Splendid. I won't be long."

Jeremy hurried round the next bend, penetrating the darkness ahead with his powerful torch. It was one Charles had given him as a belated Christmas present, and he found it most useful now.

"Seems all right," he said to himself. "Stood up to things very well, by the look of it. I'll tell Vanessa to join me now. I think I've fixed that stone safely, so we should be O.K. Once we are in the church, I'll slip back and close it. 'Twill serve Bert right to have a fright."

Hurrying back along the passage, Jeremy called to Vanessa.

"Come along, Vanessa. Want any help? Leave the slab open, just in case I can't work the one at the other end."

Vanessa did not need telling twice, and in less than half an hour she and Jeremy were standing together in the small, rarely used vestry of Marsdale Church. Looking up, Jeremy saw tears

in Vanessa's eyes, and he realised that in spite of laughter and courage, she was almost at the end of her tether.

"Now give me those rugs and I'll make you up a bed in the Manor pew. It's cushioned and should be comfortable. Directly it's light I'll try to get us out of here."

When Vanessa was settled, rather against her will, in the big, old-fashioned pew, Jeremy fixed up the lantern for her and went back to close the secret entrance.

"It'll soon be thinking of getting light now, I hope," he remarked on his return to Vanessa. "Got any suggestions about what we can do next?"

Vanessa shook her head.

"Are all the windows too small for one of us to get through? I suppose they're stained glass, though, and we couldn't break them."

"We would if it were any use, but it isn't. This building's very old, and has such narrow windows that we couldn't possibly get out that way."

"Doesn't anyone ever come to the churchyard?"

"Possibly; but I doubt it. They haven't buried folk here for ages, and last time I peeped in it looked horribly overgrown and neglected. If only there were a bell! But that collapsed when I was a boy. Fell and cracked or something, and there was neither the will nor the money to have it recast. My grandfather wasn't a churchman, and he was the only one in the parish with any money. Naturally Marsdale Church doesn't interest Eversley folk, and nice as Mr. Halliday is from all I hear and judging from his son, Marsdale is rather his stepchild."

"It seems a dear little church, and so friendly after those cellars," declared Vanessa. "I hate being underground. Thank goodness I had on this warm garment instead of my evening frock!"

"It's always wise to be suitably clothed if you go getting yourself kidnapped," teased Jeremy. "Even I took the precaution of putting on an overcoat. Like a nip of brandy? It might make you sleep."

"Make me dithery, more likely. I shall probably be turned out of Heronscourt if it gets known I've spent the night alone with you in a church drinking brandy."

"If you are I'll find you a job," Jeremy promised, so warmly that Vanessa flushed.

Directly it was light enough to see, they began to explore the dim little church.

"Not much dust about," Vanessa pointed out. "Probably that means nearly another month before a service is held here."

"Actually, only a fortnight," Jeremy told her. "But we can't live on brandy for fourteen days. What stout doors and fine locks they made in the bad old days!"

"What beastly little windows!" countered Vanessa. "They may look nice but they aren't practical as a means of exit. Let's go along to the vestry and try our luck from there."

But even in this more secular part of the church the windows were too small for anyone to crawl through.

"I can open the top half of this one," Jeremy cried joyfully. "Now, with the help of a chair and a few hassocks, we'll get a peep at the outside world. Wonder if it's raining or snowing."

"Not cold enough for snow, thank goodness," Vanessa declared. "If I *had* to be abducted, why couldn't it have been in the summer, when the weather's warm and the nights are short?"

"Try to arrange it better next time," grinned Jeremy. "There, that should be high enough. Help me to climb the perilous heights."

"What can you see?" asked Vanessa eagerly, as a wobbly Jeremy peered out through the small opening.

"A bit of dead yew, a few feet of grey sky, and half a dozen overgrown tombstones. Most exhilarating!"

Vanessa giggled.

"Come down and let me have a look," she begged. "Men never can see anything."

"Be careful," warned Jeremy. "We don't want any broken bones. Those hassocks are terribly rickety. I shall stand here; then, if you fall, I can catch you."

"It is a pretty dismal outlook," Vanessa admitted ruefully. "It might look better with the sun shining. What can we do to attract attention? One of us can't stand up here all day."

"No." Jeremy looked round for inspiration. "I've got it," he cried. "I'll tie my big handkerchief to the end of the long pole

thing they use to extinguish the candles on the altar, and stick it out of the window. Anyone seeing that would be sure to come and investigate."

But the hours wore on, and evidently no one saw the distress signal hanging from the window.

"Shall I go down and see if Bert's left us some food?" asked Jeremy as the day wore on and no one came.

"No. Please don't leave me," Vanessa begged. "I don't want to be alone. I'm not a scrap hungry. But perhaps you are?" she added as an afterthought.

"Not a bit," lied Jeremy valiantly. "Shall I try to play the organ? That might be heard."

"Can you play?" asked Vanessa curiously.

"Not a note. But that's a detail. I can—"

"Ssh! Listen! Isn't that someone singing outside?"

Jeremy ran to the window, clambered up on the hassocks, and looked out.

"It is someone," he cried excitedly. "It's an old woman. Hi! You! Do come here. We need help."

The stooping figure straightened herself and turned round.

"Heavens, it's old Mad Margie. How can I make her understand? Margie, Margie, listen. It's me, Jeremy Marsdale."

A look of terror flooded the old creature's face, and she backed away. Jeremy was desperate. He felt in his pocket and found Vanessa's bead. Deftly he threw it at Margie.

"Catch," he cried, and she obeyed. "Give that to the first person you meet, and ask them to come here," he pleaded, but the old crone had fled.

Fear lent wings to her feet, and in a moment she was out of sight.

"Did she understand?" demanded Vanessa eagerly.

"I—I don't know. She seemed frightened. She's daft, you know, and I scared her. But she caught the bead, and I think she's pretty sure to show it to somebody. You can rest assured that everyone in Marsdale and Eversley has heard about your broken necklace by this time."

Weary and depressed, Lyntie rang up Desmond after lunch and asked him if he would go for a walk with her. He agreed to

meet her outside the Rectory at a quarter past two. Directly he saw her approaching he knew she was feeling disheartened, for her usually upright springy figure was bowed and looked dejected.

"I've a message for you, Lyn, from Dad," he said, as they walked up the lane. "He told me to tell you that 'Hope is grief's best music'."

"That was sweet of him," Lyntie cried warmly. "People *are* good to me. I'll try to remember that, Des, and not give way. Sid and Tilly are meeting Jimmy this afternoon. I believe Sid's got something up his sleeve. Wish I had."

"What about a visit to the Manor?" suggested Desmond. "We may find another clue there. I can't believe John Marsh is a crook. If he's mixed up in this business, it's not of his own free will."

"Oh, Des, I *am* glad to hear you say that. That's what's hurting me so. I trusted him, I suppose in my heart I still do, and it's awful to hear people accusing him of abducting Van. Do you think he was hunting for her and they caught him? Perhaps he knew too much, and so they had to make him a prisoner. He might be with Van at this very moment. I'd like to believe that."

"If so, someone at the Manor must be implicated," mused Desmond. "Do you think it might be Rudge?"

"Possibly. Shall we look him up and see if we can find out anything? I'll be heaps happier if I'm doing something."

"Good. Then we'll step out for the east lodge. It's this side. Tired?"

"Not physically," Lyntie answered. "I've thought so much that my brain's worn out, but I can walk a hundred miles if the way leads to Van."

"Good again," declared Desmond. "Lay on, Macduff."

For some time they walked in silence, till Lyntie's attention was caught and held by a flying figure.

"Heavens!" she breathed. "It's Mad Margie, Des. She looks upset. I must talk to her and see if I can find out anything, but I'm afraid she'll not talk if you're about. Would you lose yourself for a bit? I'll whistle if I need you."

"Anything to oblige," murmured Desmond dryly. "I wouldn't

hip your style for a fortune. I'll take the footpath over there. Yell or whistle when you're through."

Nodding, Lyntie hurried off to meet Margie, who, on seeing her, stopped running and assumed an air of mystery.

"Hello, Margie," said Lyntie with a smile. "How are you? None the worse for your wetting the other day?"

"No, little lady. As I told you, Margie is strong."

"And wise," said Lyntie. "You warned me, and I taught my parrot to cry as you told me, but in spite of him the thieves came."

The old crone nodded.

"I knew it," she said simply. "There are evil spirits everywhere. They haunt poor Margie when she goes to talk to her friends."

"Has something frightened you?" asked Lyntie gently.

"The spirits that cry out and throw things at me. He spoke with the voice of the dead. He named a name. Margie is mad, but she remembers those who were kind to her. You lent me your beautiful scarf, little lady, and you are not ashamed to wear it again after poor old Margie has had it on her head."

"Of course not. Why should I be?"

"I give my pretty lady a present. It comes from the evil ones, but it will not hurt one as good as you. Is it not pretty?"

She held out her withered old hand, and Lyntie nearly fainted from shock, for in it lay a carved ivory bead.

"Margie," she gasped, "where did you find that?"

"I told you. It was given me by the evil spirits."

Lyntie frowned.

"But where?" she persisted.

"I was talking to my friends, my only friends," Margie muttered.

"Your friends!" Lyntie was puzzled. Then suddenly she remembered Margie's love of the old churchyard. Mrs. Rudge had mentioned it that morning when she—Lyntie—was drinking her tea. "Do you mean in the churchyard, Margie?" she questioned.

"My pretty lady knows where Margie's only friends are," murmured the old soul. "All are gone. All, save Emma and the pretty lady. You are my friend?"

"Of course, Margie, dear, and thank you *so* much for this pretty bead. I shall keep it always."

Laughing and chuckling, the old woman hobbled off, all her fears forgotten. Mechanically Lyntie whistled, and a moment later Desmond joined her.

"Quick, Des," she cried. "Follow Margie and see where she goes. She may meet someone. She has just given me one of Van's beads and says the evil ones gave it to her in the church-yard. I must go there and investigate."

"But if there is evil afoot I ought to be with you," argued Desmond. "You can't go alone, Lyn. If anything happened to you it would kill Sir Bernard. He loves Vanessa dearly, but he adores you."

"Nothing will happen to me," Lyntie assured him. "It's far more important for us to know who it is Margie may be meeting. I think she just picked up the bead and imagined the rest."

"But the thieves may be hiding in Marsdale Church," persisted Desmond. "It is rarely used, and no one ever goes there in between the monthly services."

"Don't waste time, Des. Margie is already nearly out of sight. If she goes straight home, fetch the key of the church. You will be able to join me almost before I get there. Please go. I'll be all right."

Reluctantly Desmond went. In his own mind he had already decided to get that key and join Lyntie in the shortest possible time.

"Hope is grief's best music," murmured Lyntie as she raced towards the churchyard. "What a dear Mr. Halliday is and how like him to send me just *that* message!"

Her breath was coming in big gasps now, and she was forced to slacken her speed. It was as though a great engine was where her heart usually was—a great engine thumping and pumping and bumping. At last she saw the old lychgate looming up ahead of her, and she slowed her pace to a walk.

"If I puff like a steam-roller and clump along like a herd of wild buffalo, anyone hiding near will hear me coming. Curb your impetuosity, Lyntie, my child, and remember that silence is golden in more ways than one."

Keeping to the grass, Lyntie stole cautiously forward. The lychgate was a little way open. Lyntie frowned.

"Margie may have been frightened and left it open, and she may not," Lyntie murmured. "Walk warily, like Tory, Octocat."

Up the overgrown path she stole, her feet making no sound on the grass and weeds. How desolate it looked! Rank grass covered many of the once-loved graves. Lyntie shivered. Then she saw the pole sticking from the vestry window, and on it a large white handkerchief. What could it mean? Silently she crept over the grass towards it, looking round her at almost every step. Suddenly she paused. Had she heard voices? After a moment's intent listening, Lyntie pressed noiselessly forward. If only the handkerchief were not so high up, she could reach it and see to whom it belonged. That is, if it were marked. She was standing looking up at it when she heard a distinct sound from within the church. In a flash she was behind the thick yew tree, through the branches of which she could see without being seen.

"No one there," she heard a voice saying. "You must have dreamed those stealthy footsteps, Jeremy."

A wave of sickness engulfed Lyntie, so intense that for a moment she could not speak or move. But it passed, and an instant later she was racing forward.

"Van, Van," she shouted, "it's me, Lyntie."

Then the eyes of the two sisters met.

"It's Lyntie," cried Vanessa, her voice shrill with relief and joy. "Oh, Jeremy, we're found at last. How did you know where we were, Lyn, darling?"

"Margie gave me your bead. She said the evil ones had flung it at her, or some such tosh, but I gathered she got it here, and so I came to investigate. However long have you been shut up here? You must be starving."

"Not really. We had chicken and brandy for supper and breakfast," giggled Vanessa, a trifle hysterically.

"Chicken and brandy!" Lyntie exclaimed. "Then Jake and Co. have sure done you proud. Who else is there with you?"

"Me, Lyntie. Get down, Vanessa, and let me have a peep at Lyntie's phiz. I'm John Marsh."

"So I was right," cried Lyntie happily. "You were caught trying to rescue Vanessa. Won't that be one in the eye for

Inspector Pentland! He's all set to arrest you for murder, or only slightly less. He told Charles who you are, and he told us, just St. Bernard and Mr. Lutwyche and me. No one else was to know till you gave the word, and——”

“Can you get us out of this place, Lyn?” cut in Jeremy Marsdale. “I think Vanessa’s had about enough. The sooner we get her home, the better. Do you know where the key’s kept?”

“Desmond’s fetching it. He should soon be here. I believe he thinks I’m already in the hands of crooks. I told him to follow Margie, but I could see by the look in his eye that he didn’t intend to.”

“Good! Octocats once more to the rescue!” laughed Jeremy.

“Of course. Now we’ll be able to make Rep an honorary member. We haven’t had the heart to do so before. I must teach him to say ‘Long live the Octocats’! I think I’ll go and meet Desmond and get the key. Then he can go and phone the Manor for a car. You’ll probably be glad of a lift. If Charles is in, he’s pretty sure to come for you himself.”

Chapter XIV

THE ROBES OF LAWYERS ARE LINED WITH THE OBSTINACY OF THEIR CLIENTS

When Charles and Desmond drove up to the church, Vanessa and Lyntie were sitting on a seat in the porch, and Jeremy Marsdale was out in the lane watching for the car. Charles greeted his cousin warmly, and then hurried to help Vanessa into the car. Desmond felt rather out of things till Vanessa turned to him.

“Come and sit by me, Desmond. I’ve so much to thank you for—you and the Octocats. Lyntie has been telling me how you have helped her and kept her spirits up during these last days. I’m most grateful, and I won’t ever laugh at the Octocats again. I’ll even include Rep in the general amnesty, for although he got

me abducted, he also roused Lyntie and set in motion the wheels for my rescue."

"Everyone will be delighted to see you again, Vanessa," cried Desmond. "Sir Bernard will be wild with delight when you walk in."

"I'm so glad Inspector Pentland was wrong in his assumption," chuckled Lyntie. "You know, he thought John Marsh was implicated in the burglary, Van."

"We've all been a bit wrong, I'm afraid," put in Desmond. "We thought Rudge might be guilty, but all the time it was Jevons."

"Jevons!" exclaimed Lyntie. "How do you know?"

"He's absconded. Charles told me as we came along."

"Found out we'd fled and got the wind up, I expect," Jeremy Marsdale called back over his shoulder. "I thought I'd give him a fright by closing that slab. He knew the way into the secret cellars, but *not* the way out."

"Is that how you escaped?" cried Desmond with interest. "Are there really secret cellars and passages under the Manor?"

"There are, Des," said Lyntie ruefully. "And *we* can only boast a priest's room at Fairmeads."

"Quite enough, too," declared Vanessa, who looked tired now that the first excitement of her rescue was past. "Does my uncle know we've been found, Charles?"

"No one does. I didn't even stop to ring the Inspector. Time enough for that when you're safe at Fairmeads. You don't mind if we go straight there, do you, Jeremy?"

"Rather not. Vanessa's the one to be considered first and foremost."

"Desmond's looking as intelligent as a donkey with brain fever," chortled Lyntie. "May we tell him about you, John-Jeremy?"

"If Charles doesn't object to the exhibiting of the family skeleton."

"You thrice-confounded ass! as Pentland says," laughed Charles. "I'm not ashamed of you. Proclaim our cousinship by all means. I shall be delighted to own you."

"Listen, Des. John Marsh is really Jeremy Marsdale, Charles's cousin," Lyntie explained. "Isn't it fantastic?"

"Is that why you dye your hair, sir?" was Desmond's only answer.

Jeremy Marsdale laughed.

"Not much escapes you Octocats," he said. "Ah, here we are at Fairmeads."

"I'm longing to see Daybreak's face," chuckled Lyntie. "He'll open his mouth and then shut it like a cod-fish."

"Why do you call him Daybreak?" asked Jeremy.

"Because his name's Alec Mason—a.m.—see?" grinned Lyntie. "Very apt, isn't it?"

"Rather! How lovely the old house looks, and how exactly like it always has done! Nothing changes here."

"Doesn't it? I'm not so sure. Wait till you've seen Rep."

"Listen, Lyntie," put in Charles Mortimer. "When we reach the house, you go in and prepare your uncle. We don't want Vanessa's return to be too great a shock."

"Good news may be told at any time, but ill in the morning," quoted Lyntie gaily. "But I'll certainly go in first and drag Mr. Lutwyche, or whoever's with St. Bernard, out of the room. Family reunions of this kind should be strictly private."

Lyntie had her way. A mystified Valerie and a puzzled Mr. Lutwyche were summoned from the library by simulated telephone calls, while Vanessa went in to her uncle. But at the end of five minutes Lyntie's patient was quite exhausted.

"They've had long enough now," she said decidedly. "Let's all go in and talk. I've so much to say, I could beat Rep easily."

"That's nothing fresh, Lyntie," teased Valerie, who looked ten years younger. "I'm *longing* to see Van, aren't you, Mr. Lutwyche?"

"Of course, my dear young lady."

They trooped into the room, and not one of the six of them ever forgot the expression they surprised on Sir Bernard's face. The next instant he looked up to greet them, and it was gone.

"Come along in, all of you. This *is* a joyful occasion. Ring for Mason, Lyntie; we must celebrate before Vanessa goes upstairs to rest."

"I think I'll wait for tea, Uncle darling," said Vanessa gently. "I've been tippling all day. Jeremy could only supply me with brandy. May I go up and have a bath, and slip into some clean

clothes? I shan't be long. Coming, Val, or do you want to stay and sing my rescuers' praises?"

"I'll come with you. Charles will tell me everything afterwards, won't you?"

"Certainly, darling, though I really need your support."

"Rubbish. Van's need is far greater. You are quite capable of standing on your own feet."

Lyntie was watching Charles Mortimer closely, and as the door closed behind Vanessa and Valerie she asked:

"What's up between you and Val, Charles?"

"Up, Lyntie? What do you mean?"

"What I say. You called her darling."

"And why not? Since she's so basely deserted me, I suppose I shall have to tell you. We vowed we would, directly Vanessa was found. Valerie has promised to marry me, but on one condition only."

"Which is?"

"That she may go back to Australia with me, Sir Bernard. I don't hate England, but I do love Australia. Life at the Manor is *not* the life for me—I'll never be really happy there—and so I hope Jeremy will consent to having the Manor, as is his right."

"I have no rights," burst out Jeremy. "I forfeited them long ago, and of course I can't step into your shoes like that. It's utterly ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Because it is."

"Do you agree with Jeremy, Lutwyche?" asked Charles.

"Your grandfather left the property to you, Mortimer, not to Jeremy."

"That's my point," cried Jeremy. "Don't be a fool, Charles."

"Is it mine unconditionally, Lutwyche?" asked Charles.

"Certainly."

"Then I can make it over to Jeremy as it stands, can't I?"

"You could, but——"

"You shan't," yelled Jeremy excitedly. "I never heard such rubbish."

"I shall."

"I shan't accept it."

"You must."

"I won't."

"You will."

"I won't."

"The robes of lawyers are lined with the obstinacy of their clients," murmured Mr. Lutwyche, as the cousins paused for breath. "Argue long enough, my dear fellows, and my costs will swallow up the Manor and all your assets. Then you'll have nothing left to argue about."

Lyntie giggled.

"I thought *I* was going to talk such a lot, and I haven't said a word yet. You'll have to give way in the end, Jeremy, if Valerie's happiness depends on it. You couldn't let her down, could he, Mr. Lutwyche?"

"With a Portia in the room, there is no need for me to voice an opinion. But I will do so, because I can see both points of view. Jeremy's pride is very natural, but so is Mortimer's homesickness. As you, Mortimer, will, I take it, go to Australia whatever happens, I shall advise Jeremy to accept the Manor, lock, stock and barrel."

"But I can't," Jeremy protested. "I've nothing with which to compensate Charles. I can't take everything and give nothing."

"Will you be doing that?" put in Sir Bernard quietly. "Freedom is everything, Jeremy, and for Charles, Australia spells freedom."

"Give way nicely, Jeremy," begged Lyntie. "And then we can have a big party at the Manor, as a house-warming for you and a farewell engagement one for Charles. It would be terrific."

"Good idea, Lyntie," approved Charles. "We'd invite everybody in Eversley and Marsdale."

"Including the Inspector," teased Sir Bernard.

"Not only including Inspector Pentland, but also P.C. Chubb," came the swift answer. "But I shall have to borrow your Mason, Sir Bernard, since Jevons has turned out so badly and fled. May I?"

"Certainly, Charles. Everyone and everything at Fairmeads is at your disposal."

"But I haven't agreed yet," burst out Jeremy. "You can't arrange a party to welcome me till I've said I'd accept."

"There's no telling what we can do, is there, Des?" Lyntie laughed.

"Don't forget I'm still a wanted man," Jeremy warned them. "Have you told the Inspector that I'm back, Charles?"

"Not yet. He deserves to wait for a bit for suspecting you. But I'll ring him up in a minute, with Sir Bernard's permission. He swore this morning when I told him Jevons had absconded."

"He'll swear more when I tell him that Jevons is really Bert Hopgood," Jeremy said. "I'm surprised the Inspector didn't recognise him. He's not been out long, and his convictions are as numerous as his aliases."

"Is Bert Hopgood his real name?" asked Lyntie.

"Yes. He's William Hartwell's half-brother, you know, but you'd better keep that under your hat. Farmer Hartwell may not care for notoriety."

"Who is Jake, Jeremy?" Lyntie questioned eagerly. "Sid saw you meet him the night you were prowling round here. Christmas Day, wasn't it?"

Jeremy flushed, and laughed awkwardly.

"What don't you know?" he demanded. "I did come here to squint round. I was *so* homesick for the old haunts of my boyhood, and when I reached Fairmeads I had to come in. Then I saw lights and heard laughter, and the past came rushing back and engulfed me in a flood of longing."

"Then you can understand poor Charles," cried Lyntie quickly. "You've suffered from homesickness, and so you *must* understand his. We don't want you to go, of course, Charles, but we do want you and Val to be happy. Won't Miss Lethbridge be livid when she hears that Valerie's leaving her!"

No one answered this, and in the silence that followed, Mason came to announce the Inspector. When he entered the room he stood still, gazing at Jeremy.

"Rather a shock, I'm afraid, Pentland," said Sir Bernard dryly. "We were just going to ring through and tell you that Jeremy Marsdale has found my niece. She is just changing now, but will be with us quite soon."

"I am indeed glad, Sir Bernard. Is Miss Dimsdale unhurt?"

"Quite. In fact, in his own fashion, Jevons—Hopgood—was

good to her," Jeremy declared. "But she will tell you about her unpleasant adventure. I hear you want to question me?"

"We did, but we don't any more," Brian Pentland told him. "We've had a full confession from Bert Hopgood. He was knocked down in Brighton early this morning and fatally injured. Evidently in a very nervous state, he sprang off the pavement on seeing a policeman, and an oncoming bus could not pull up in time. He died about two hours ago. He kept babbling about a note he'd left. Did you find one, Mortimer?"

"No. Where did he leave it?"

"We couldn't understand. He told us he and Jake Turner arranged the burglary and never meant to kidnap Miss Dimsdale. But she came down and recognised Jevons, the butler. Scared stiff, Bert agreed to keep her at the Manor till he received word from Jake that all was well. Then he intended joining his pal, getting his share of the money, and clearing out to South Africa. We tried to find out where Miss Dimsdale was hidden, but all he kept saying was, 'She's with Marsdale. She's with Marsdale.' Then he became unconscious, and he died without further speech."

"Poor chap! He wasn't all bad. Merely weak and embittered," muttered Jeremy. "Jake's the rotter. I hope you get him."

"We shall," declared the Inspector. "He's pretty well known in the London area, and they'll catch up with him in time. I only hope it will be in time to save some of your possessions, Sir Bernard."

"If so, well and good, if not—well, nothing seems to matter much, now Vanessa is back."

"Inspector," burst out Lyntie, her eyes dancing, "how would you like to have your recent suspect as lord of the manor?"

The Inspector frowned questioningly, first at Lyntie, then at Jeremy.

"You must not joke with the law, Lyntie," laughed Sir Bernard. "What she means, Pentland, is that Mortimer hopes to return to Australia and leave Jeremy here as owner of the Manor."

"But—but is that possible?"

"Quite," Mr. Lutwyche informed him. "There is still no law in England which prevents your giving away what is yours,

providing the Government get their share, and, of course, the lawyers!"

"But I haven't agreed to the plan yet," objected Jeremy.

"You will," put in Lyntie easily. "You're no spoilsport, and I'm sure you don't want to give Mr. Lutwyche a fur-lined coat. I'll get Van to ask you. You can't refuse her anything when you've just rescued her from being buried alive. I can hear her and Val coming, so I'll leave you all to settle things, while I go and phone Cynthia and the Monkeys. Coming, Des? I've got a marvellous idea," she went on as they crossed the hall to the telephone. "I'm going to suggest to Cynthia that we Octocats all meet there to-morrow, if she can arrange it, and we'll take Rep and make him an honorary member. I promised Cyn she should see him, and she'd have done so before this, if it hadn't been for Van's disappearance. We'll try to get everybody, even Jimmy Carter. I'll tell Cyn she's not to bother about tea. We'll go early, and then Sid or Tilly can bring Jimmy back here to tea, and you and the Monkeys can have it with me."

"Can't see Hydrotite allowing that," grinned Desmond. "It's a smashing idea, Lyn, and Cyn will love it, but I don't mind betting our dear Hydrotite will insist on tea."

"But ought she to, Des? I mean, it's such a lot of work. If she knows we're coming, Mrs. Fellowes will probably arrange to go to Brighton for shopping or something. She hates leaving Cynthia unless she has friends coming."

"See what Cynthia says," advised Desmond. "Shall I get the number for you?"

Punctually at three o'clock the next afternoon, eight boys and girls plus one parrot were standing outside Blenheim Lodge.

"I suppose Frank can't make it, Mark?" asked Desmond.

"No, Mr. Desmond. He's very sorry, but things aren't like they used to be when he worked for your dad. He says he thinks you ought to let Jimmy take his place, and make him a hon'ary member like Miss Cynthia."

"Jimmy flushed a vivid crimson and glanced half-sheepishly, half-hopefully at Lyntie.

"Might be a good idea," she said. "But the best idea at the moment is to get off this pavement. If we don't, Rep will soon

attract an audience. I hadn't the heart to cover him up, with the sun shining."

Desmond's only answer was to ring the bell.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Rep, as a smiling Mackintosh opened the door.

Mackintosh's smile vanished.

"Miss Lyntie!" she exclaimed. "You've never brought that heathen bird here. I won't have it teaching my Miss Cynthia all sorts of horrible words."

"Rep isn't a heathen bird, he's a hero," expostulated Lyntie.

"Rep's a hero, Rep's a hero, a hell-falutin' hofficer," squawked the bird, leering balefully at the outraged Mackintosh.

She drew herself up to her full height as Sid repressed a snigger.

"Never did I think to hear such language in this house," she declared. "I suppose you can be a hero without being a gentleman, Miss Lyntie, but—"

"Time, gentlemen, please!" shrieked the parrot, his head on one side,

"Whisky and soda,
Eggs and ham;
Feed me well,
And I'll not care a damn."

"Rep, be quiet!" ordered Lyntie. "Behave yourself when you're taken out to tea, and treat Mackintosh with respect."

"Mazawattee, Mazawattee, Rep wants his t—e—ee—a!" shrilled Rep. "Mac—mac—mac, make Rep's tea. Rep's a hero! Rep's a hero! Fire, murder, thieves! Bless St. Bernard!"

"How your uncle puts up with the creature, I can't think, Miss Lyntie," Mackintosh said, shaking her head. "Not that the language would hurt a gentleman like Sir Bernard, as it would my Miss Cynthia. That innocent she is! Well, up you go, and you lads wipe your feet properly."

"Is Mrs. Fellowes out, Hydrotite?" asked Desmond.

"That she is. Not likely the mistress would want to hear all your chatter. Glad I am she's gone, too. If that creature had sworn at her, I'd 'ave wrung his neck."

"Stifling their laughter, the Octocats, followed rather shyly by Jimmy, ran up the stairs to Cynthia's room.

"Here you are," she cried, as Lyntie ran in chuckling, "I thought you were never coming up. What was wrong?"

"This heathen bird swore at Hydrotite, and she objected," Lyntie explained.

Cynthia laughed.

"Oh, Rep, you bad boy!" she scolded. "Still, I'm glad to have you at my party. Come along, everybody, and settle by the fire."

"This is Jimmy Carter, Miss Cynthia," burst out Sid. "'E's been 'elping us to find Miss Vanessa."

"I'm so glad you were able to come, Jimmy," Cynthia said with a smile. "Frank not able to make it, Mark?"

"No, Miss Cynthia. He's very sorry and all that, but he just couldn't get the time off."

"Hard lines," said Cynthia sympathetically. "Shall we hear all about everything first, Lyn, and initiate Rep afterwards? He's a very handsome bird, isn't he?"

"Rep's a hero! A hell-falutin' hero! Bless the thieves! Murder St. Bernard! Fire the Navy! God save the King! 'And Rep! 'And Rep!'"

Everybody laughed.

"Shall I cover him up, Cyn, while we talk?" asked Lyntie.

"Oh, no. He's so funny, and I love him already. Clever Rep!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Rep. "Such a clever boy. Rep wants his tea. Mac make the tea. Mazawattee, Mazawattee, Rep wants his te—e—ee—eee—a!"

"You must wait till we've finished," Lyntie told him. "If you're quiet, you'll get it all the sooner. What do you want to hear about first, Cyn?"

"Everything. From the moment Van was kidnapped till she arrived safely back at Fairmeads."

"That's rather a tall order," declared Lyntie, but she began at the beginning, and gave them all the details she knew.

"Cool Fancy Mr. Marsh being Mr. Marsdale," exclaimed Sid. "Why isn't 'e at the Manor, Miss Lyntie, instead of Mr. Mortimer?"

"It's a long story, Sid, and it's just possible that Mr. Marsdale will be returning to the Manor as its owner. Nothing's been decided yet, but Charles wants to marry Val and go back to Australia. This isn't common knowledge, but no one here's likely to talk till it is."

"What a thrill!" exclaimed Aprille. "Will Val be married from Fairmeads, Lyn? She hasn't any people of her own, has she?"

"No. I can't say what will happen yet, Spring. It's all far too much in the air. But personally, I think Jeremy will agree to having the Manor and letting Charles and Valerie go to Australia."

"So Mr. Marsh, Mr. Marsdale, I should say, *was* Splitshoe after all," declared Mark. "What was he doing at Fairmeads, Miss Lyntie?"

"Just looking. He was down on his luck and longed to see the old haunts of his boyhood. He's not a friend of Jake's. That was just a chance encounter."

Wisely Lyntie refrained from telling them about Jeremy's time in prison and his friendship with Bert Hopgood.

"Fancy it being Jevons all the time," cried August. "That was something we none of us suspected. No wonder he was scared when Vanessa recognised him."

"He's paid the price for his share in the crime," Lyntie said softly. "He must have been scared to death not to hear a bus coming."

"He was more a fool than a knave," agreed Desmond. "I hope they get Jake Turner. He's a nasty bit of work."

"Is P.C. Clifton still looking for his man?" asked Mark with a grin. "I bet he feels sick. Yet how was he to know the chap was probably just a dc—decoy to get him out of the way?"

"By usin' 'is brain box same as me and you," burst out Sid. "'E could 'ave gone into Tilly's place and phoned the Inspector for orders."

"He was a long way from the lodge, Sid," Tilly pointed out.

"It's easy to criticise *after* the event," broke in Desmond. "You never know what you'll do in a crisis till you're tested. Cynthia, Frank can so rarely get to our pow-wows now that he suggests

becoming an honorary member of the Octocats like you, and letting Jimmy here take his place. What do you all think?"

"Good idea," agreed Cynthia.

"Wizard prang!" approved August.

"Carried unanimously," cried Lyntie. "No one objects, do they?"

No one did.

"Good, then we'll initiate first Jimmy and then Rep."

"Rep's a hero! Rep's a bally hero! Send for the police! Bless St. Bernard! Rep's a reprobate! A repellent, reprehensible reptile."

"You'll never be an Octocat if you don't behave properly," said Lyntie sternly.

"Cats! Bah! Tory's a cat! Tory's a cat! Rep's a hero!"

"Put a sock in it," groaned Desmond, flinging a light rug over the cage. "You shall come out to be initiated, but not before. Now, Jimmy. Are you ready to take the oath?"

"Yes, Mr. Desmond."

"Good. Then take this book and kiss it. Then repeat after me: I, James Carter, of Bramleigh in the county of Sussex—"

"I, James Carter, of Bramleigh in the county of Sussex—"

"Swear to uphold the honour of the Octocats on all occasions."

"Swear to uphold the honour of the Octocats on all occasions."

"Never will I make known to anyone outside the Society—"

"Never will I make known to anyone outside the Society—"

"Any of the Society's secrets."

"Any of the Society's secrets."

"I will do all in my power to help my fellow Octocats whenever they want me."

"I will do all in my power to help my fellow Octocats whenever they want me."

"So help me God."

"So help me God."

"Lovely, Jimmy, now you're an Octocat," cried Lyntie. "Now let's initiate Rep."

"How?" asked August. "You can't make him repeat all that."

"Of course not. It'll suffice if he says: 'I'm an Octocat,'" Desmond declared, removing the parrot's cover.

But try as they would, they could not make Rep call himself anything but a hero.

"It's no use," sighed Lyntie. "We should have taught him sooner. Sid, will you undertake to teach him to say he's an Octocat?"

"I'll try, Miss Lyntie." Sid beamed. "I like Rep, and 'c likes me."

"Ha, ha ha,
He, he he,
I like Rep and
Rep likes me.

Ha, ha ha,
He, he, he,
Rep's a hero who
Wants some tea."

"Rep, you're a poet," chortled Cynthia. "Now why couldn't you say that to Nanny? She'd have been entranced."

"Not Hydrotite," said Desmond. "She hates parrots."

"Hydro's tight! Hydro's tight!" squawked the bird. "Whisky and soda. Whisky and soda. Where's my whisky and soda? Ha, ha! Rep knows a thing or two. Hydro's tight! Hydro's tight!"

"Now you've done it, Des," sighed Aprille. "For goodness' sake cover him up before tea arrives. If he tells Hydrotite she's tight, she'll faint on the spot, and bang goes our tea."

"Bang goes a tanner! Bang goes a tanner!" shrilled the bird. "Give Rep a tanner. Bless St. Bernard!"

"Isn't he clever?" cried Tilly admiringly. "Wish he were mine, but I don't suppose Mum would let me keep him. She hasn't any sense of humour."

"Better send him to the Rectory to be cured of his evil ways," laughed Desmond.

"I shouldn't," cut in August. "One of the chaps at school had an aunt who had a parrot and an Irish cook. Evidently the cook knew the old lady was leaving her something in her will, and when she was upset, the cook always went about muttering, 'I wish the old woman would die'. Of course the parrot picked this up, and *would* say it in the lounge, much to the old lady's

distress. When she went away for a holiday, she asked the Rector to take her bird, which he did. Some time later the cook began her muttering again, and the parrot electrified the old lady and her friends by shrilly declaiming: 'I wish the old woman would die. We beseech Thee to hear us, Good Lord!'

Hoots of merriment greeted this tale, and Tilly nearly had hysterics. Only Rep was serious and silent. He regarded them all with his bright, knowing eyes.

"It's after four, Cyn," Lyntie said, glancing at her watch. "Would you like some of us to go and help Hydrotite, since she *will* give us tea? The trays will be far too heavy for her."

"Oh, do let us, Cyn," urged August. "I often help at home."

"Help yourself, you mean," jeered his sister. "He's not safe with grub, Cynthia—honestly, he isn't!"

"Who took the dumpling from the stewdle-oodle-oo?" retorted August with a grimace.

"Peace and goodwill! Peace and goodwill!" squawked Rep aptly.

"Go on, boys, and fetch the tea," laughed Cynthia. "If Nanny doesn't want you she'll soon send you back."

There was a stampede towards the door, and presently Desmond reappeared with a large tray. The others followed with various plates and dishes.

"Where's the tea?" asked Cynthia.

"Hydrotite's bringing that. She insisted," August told her. "I think she wants to make quite sure Rep hasn't done you an injury."

"You wouldn't, would you, Rep? We're friends, aren't we?" Cynthia asked the parrot.

But he would not speak. He looked at Cynthia and then all round the room. At this moment Mackintosh opened the door and came in with the tea. Then Rep lifted up his voice. With an almost inhuman cackle he shrieked:

"Hydro's tight! Hydro's tight!"

Chapter XV

FAT AND MERRY, LEAN AND SAD, PALE AND PETTISH, RED AND BAD

“Hullo, Lyntie,” cried Charles Mortimer. “You’re late. I thought you weren’t coming. You said you’d come early and help us to receive the motley host.”

“I know I did, and I’m sorry I’m late. It was all Rep’s fault. He wouldn’t come when I wanted him—I let him out sometimes, you know—and I had to wait before I could catch him.”

“Good heavens, Lyntie, you’ve never brought that bird with you!” exclaimed Jeremy Marsdale, hurrying up at this moment. “Why, he was not invited. He’s a gate-crasher.”

“He isn’t,” protested Lyntie firmly. “You invited all the Octocats, and he’s one of them. Of course he had to come.”

“Rep’s a hero! Rep’s a hero!” cried the parrot with a swagger.

“Maybe, but not such a hero as I am,” grinned Charles. “Do find a place for him, Lyntie, and come and help us. Jeremy’s better off because he used to know most of this heterogeneous conglomeration, but I’ve never even heard of half of them. Thank goodness Sir Bernard’s here. They are all eager to speak to him and pass me by quite contentedly.”

“You wait till the speeches begin,” laughed Lyntie. “You’ll have to make a speech then. If you like, I’ll bring Rep out to help you.”

“You dare!” threatened Charles, and Lyntie fled, laughing.

She found a cosy corner free from draught for Rep, and as she turned to rejoin her hosts, Desmond, Aprille, and August came into the library.

“Hullo, Lyntie, we’ve been looking for you everywhere. “What happened?” demanded Desmond. “Sir Bernard’s car overtook us, but you weren’t in it.”

“No, I couldn’t catch Rep, and St. Bernard wouldn’t wait. He’s a stickler for punctuality. I had to hang about for Dakers to come back for me.”

"It's becoming a habit, this carting round of that bird," burst out August. "I only hope he doesn't disgrace us to-day as he did at Cynthia's. Poor old Hydrotite!"

"Is Cynthia coming to-day, Lyn?" asked Aprille.

"Yes. Dakers is fetching her at half-past three. Mrs. Fellowes thought she oughtn't to be here too long, because she tires so easily."

"I think it's simply super of Mr. Marsdale and Mr. Mortimer to throw this party," cried Aprille warmly.

"Lyntie practically made them," grinned Desmond. "It's all her doing. She twists Charles and Jeremy round her little finger. It's positively indecent."

"You're jealous," teased Lyntie. "Of course I suggested this big party. It's what was needed to wind up the holidays. I'm not a bit ready for school discipline the day after to-morrow, are you?"

"Don't," groaned Aprille. "Can you imagine meek submission after *these* holidays?"

"Can't imagine it after anything where *you're* concerned," grinned Desmond. "But these holidays have beeen pretty good."

"Wizard prang!" exclaimed August. "Except, of course, for Vanessa's horrible experience."

"Those days seemed months," declared Lyntie. "I'm jolly glad they've got Jake Turner."

"So am I!" agreed Aprille. "Will your uncle get his stuff back, Lyn?"

"Some of it. But that isn't so terribly important, since the thieves left the really valuable things behind. Inspector Pentland's going about with a perpetual cheshire grin on his face, and our Charlie looks as though he'd won promotion."

"Ssh!" warned Desmond. "Here he comes, with Sally Sudweeks!"

"It is really *most* kind of Mr. Marsdale and his cousin to invite us here like this, isn't it, Mr. Chubb?" twittered Miss Sudweeks. "Ah, Miss Lyntie! How happy you must be feeling to-day! Is this the bird that raised the alarm?"

"Yes, Miss Sudweeks. This is Rep. I hear you've got your man," went on Lyntie, turning to Charlie Chubb.

"That's right, Miss Lyntie. Jake Turner's where he ought to

be, and between ourselves I wish he'd joined that Bert Hopgood."

"Rep's a hero! Rep's a hero!" shrilled the parrot, glaring at Sally Sudweeks' Sunday hat.

"Oh!" cried Miss Sudweeks, springing back. "What a clever bird! I had heard that parrots talked intelligently, but I frankly doubted it, for I've never heard one. Clever Rep!"

"Rep likes policemen!" squawked the bird, transferring his attention to P.C. Chubb. Then, quickly running back along his perch and fixing Miss Sudweeks with a baleful eye, he shrieked: "Bless the bride! Bless the bride! Bless the bride!"

Aprille and August dissolved into cascades of laughter, but Lyntie heroically conquered the desire to laugh and plunged into explanations.

"We've taught him that, to say when the presentations are made," she said confidentially, not daring to catch P.C. Chubb's eye. The constable was red in the face with his efforts to contain his laughter. "You don't mind him, do you, Miss Sudweeks? It's your pretty hat that has attracted him. He probably thinks you look much more bridal than Valerie."

From the noise behind her, Lyntie guessed that Aprille and August had fled. She wondered if Desmond had gone, too. Miss Sudweeks, blushing and coy, was vaguely murmuring something about compliments, and Rep was laughing wickedly.

"Rep's a hero! A hell-falutin' hero! Where's my policeman? Bless St. Bernard! Bless the bride!"

"A remarkable bird," observed P.C. Chubb. "Come, Miss Sudweeks, we'd better be moving on if you want to see round the 'ouse before tea."

"I'd never have credited Charlie with so much tact," chuckled Desmond when he and Lyntie were alone. "You were marvellous, Lyn, with your bridal hat. That monstrosity! If it were ever worn at a wedding, it must have been Queen Victoria's."

Lyntie gurgled.

"Let's get out of this before someone else comes in and Rep lands us in a still more awkward situation. I do love this room. It's almost as nice as the Fairmeads library, isn't it?"

"They're both fine old houses," agreed Desmond. "I'm glad Jeremy consented to have the Manor."

"So am I. He's such a dear. He argued like anything for ages, and then gave way completely, thanks to St. Bernard and Mr. Lutwyche. Between them they made him see reason."

"I suppose that's the old chest behind which Jevons's note was found," said Desmond. "It's funny, but I always think of Bert Hopgood as Jevons. I wonder if the Hartwells will be here to-day."

"No, they felt they'd rather not come, and one can understand. Strange, Des, wasn't it, how both Jevons and Jeremy came back here and nobody knew them?"

"Oh, I don't know. They had neither of them been here for years and had changed a lot. You may be sure they didn't intend to leave the Manor grounds, and everybody here was new."

Lyntie nodded.

"Not so risky as it seems," she agreed. "Come on, Des, here's someone coming."

"Too late," muttered Desmond crossly, but Lyntie only laughed.

"It's Mr. Jefferson and Tony!" she exclaimed. "I don't mind them. In fact, I think they ought to be told how Rep behaved the other day. Hydrotite won't speak to me for years."

"Shut up, Lyn," warned Desmond. "If you use that word within a hundred miles of Rep, we'll be asking for trouble."

"Why?" asked Tony curiously.

"Because the last time we tea-ed at the Fellowes', their maid Mackintosh—*we* call her Hydrotite—was mortally offended by Rep. He waited till she was just entering the room with the tea, and then he squawked at the top of his voice: 'Hydro's tight! Hydro's tight!'

Wilfred Jefferson put back his head and roared.

"Thought I heard a familiar bellow," grinned George Langley, the schoolmaster, from the doorway. "May I share the joke?"

"We were just laughing at something Rep said, Mr. Langley," Lyntie explained. "I brought him to-day because everyone wanted to see the hero of the hour."

"Rep's a hero! Rep's a hero!" shrilled the parrot. "Who are you? Who are you?" he demanded, glaring at Mr. Langley.

"A teacher, but not yours, thank goodness," grinned the schoolmaster.

"Lyntie, who's the fat female in purple?" asked Tony Jefferson with a grin. "She has designs on me, I feel sure, and I don't like it!"

"I'm afraid I was late, and so I haven't seen all the guests yet. I don't know anyone who favours purple, but it may be the wife of the farmer from Marsdale Farm. One of the twins could tell you that. Now I really must go and find Charles and Jeremy. I feel I've let them down horribly."

As Lyntie left the library to look for her hosts, she ran full tilt into Sir Bernard and Vanessa.

"Hullo, darlings," she cried gaily. "Enjoying yourselves? What does it feel like to be lionised, Van? You and Rep definitely share the honours this time. How do you like the Manor's new butler?"

"He and Mason are managing very well," said Sir Bernard. "Can't for the life of me see why Charles and Jeremy wanted to have this party. Ridiculous in winter-time, when you can't use the grounds. And it means a lot of speeches, which I loathe."

"You shouldn't be so good at them, darling," Lyntie laughed. "Has Mr. Lutwyche turned up? He said he'd try."

"I don't know. It's such a squash. I can't think of anything save one proverb that keeps running through my head."

"Which one, St. Bernard?"

"Fat and merry, lean and sad, pale and pettish, red and bad," chuckled the baronet.

"Scrummy!" giggled Lyntie. "And do you put everyone you meet into one of the categories? Rep's just been saying 'Bless the bride' to Sally Sudweeks. She and Charlie Chubb ought to be two of the fat and merry ones."

Sir Bernard laughed.

"You are a ridiculous child, Lyntie, but I'll own you're a tonic. Whom would you term lean and sad?"

"Margie for one, if she's here, and possibly Hydrotite. She's like a rasher of wind cut sideways, and she hasn't smiled since Rep told her she was tight."

"That bird will lose you all your friends before he's finished, Lyn," put in Vanessa.

"Not any that matter," declared Lyntie confidently. "Have

you seen a fat female in purple, Van? She has designs on Tony Jefferson, or so he thinks."

Vanessa laughed gaily.

"It's poor harmless Mrs. Jackson, Willie the cobbler's wife," she said. "As you know, she thinks Willie is a little tin god. I don't suppose she is aware of any other mere male's existence."

"How excruciating!" chortled Lyntie. "If you're going into the library, do tell Tony and set his mind at rest. Where's Val? She ought to be with Charles, but she wasn't when I arrived."

"Probably she has an attack of nerves," suggested Vanessa.

"Nerves? Bah!" snorted Sir Bernard.

"St. Bernard, darling, that was just like Rep," declared Lyntie. "I'm sure that clever boy copies you on every possible occasion."

With a smothered laugh, Sir Bernard turned away, and Lyntie darted off. The sound of raised voices at the front door attracted her attention, and she paused to listen. Hearing a voice she recognised as Margie's, she went forward to investigate.

"What's wrong, Daybreak?" she asked in low tones.

"It's Mrs. Rudge's aunt, Miss Lyntie. She wants to come to the party, and Rudge says she can't."

"Why not?" Lyntie sounded indignant. "Of course Margie must come in. She's been invited as much as Sam Rudge. I'll see to this, Daybreak."

Lyntie stepped forward, past the scowling Sam and tearful Emma, at whom she smiled encouragingly. Just for an instant she paused on seeing Margie, for the old soul had decked herself out in every colour of the rainbow. But only those who knew Lyntie very well would have noticed the hesitation. With a charming smile of welcome she held out her hand to Margie.

"How lovely of you to come, Margie!" she cried. "I'm so glad you brought her along, Mrs. Rudge. The party wouldn't have been complete without one of the day's heroines. If it hadn't been for Margie, I shouldn't have known my sister and Mr. Marsdale were in the church. Come and be introduced, Margie."

The old crone smiled at Lyntie, her bright eyes tender.

"My pretty lady wants Margie. I make myself beautiful for the party and you. I will go anywhere with you."

Together the ill-assorted pair walked off, leaving a dumbfounded Rudge and an amused Mason behind.

"Jeremy," called Lyntie, on seeing that her host was disengaged. "Come and talk to my friend Margie. It was she who sent me to Marsdale Church to find you, you know."

With a pleasant smile, Jeremy took Margie's hand.

"I'm glad to have this opportunity of seeing you and thanking you for all you've done," he said kindly. "We owe you a great deal. Twice I have called at the lodge, but both times you were out."

"Master Jeremy!" gasped the old soul. "My Master Jeremy! But they told me you were dead. We were friends, long ago."

"We were indeed. When I was lonely you used to tell me stories. We went for walks together, and you taught me the names of the flowers and the birds."

"You—you haven't forgotten? You remember old Margie?"

"Of course. I don't forget my friends."

Someone else came up at this moment, and Lyntie drew Margie gently away.

"He called me his friend," declared the old soul, her bright eyes shining with tears of joy. "He has come back. Now luck will return to the Manor, and I have lived to see it."

"Yes, Margie, dear, our friend has at last come into his own, and we are happy for and with him," said Lyntie. "Would you like to meet my parrot? Evidently Mr. Mortimer is busy. I can't see him anywhere."

For a moment Margie hesitated; then she said:

"I will see the bird. To-c'y nothing can harm Margie. And I shall also see the bride? Emma said there was a bride."

"Yes, of course you must see Valerie. Later my uncle will make a speech, and Rep—I hope—will cry 'Bless the bride!'"

"I have here a present for the loved lady." Margie felt in the pocket of her gay skirt and produced a small carved bean. "It is a lucky bean, and will bring great happiness to the loved lady. It comes from far across the sea, where the sun shines always, and people are like me, but happy. Will my pretty lady give the loved lady this? It is all I have to give."

"It's a marvellous present, but you must give it to Valerie yourself. She will love it and treasure it, I know. Here is Rep! Isn't he a lovely bird?"

For a moment the clever bird and the mad woman stared at each other, then Margie smiled and Rep shrieked:

"Bless the bride! Bless the bride! Fire, murder, thieves!"

"He is wise with the wisdom of many years, little lady. You call him Rep?"

"Rep's a hero! Rep's a hero! Where's my whisky and soda?"

"Could you do with one? So could I," cried a voice from behind them, and turning, Lyntie saw her headmistress, Miss Ticehurst, with her brother.

"So glad you could come, Miss Ticehurst, and you, Dr. Ticchurst. This is Margie. She helped me to find Van and Jeremy, you know."

While the Ticehursts were talking to Margie, who seemed to like them, and was not at all shy, Lyntie fled to find Valerie. She ran her to earth, talking to Charles.

"Come along, you two," she urged. "Poor old Margie's turned up. Rudge didn't want her to come in, but fortunately I happened to come along. She's talking to the Ticehursts and Rep now, but she wants you, Val. She's brought the loved lady a lucky bean. It's really a charming little thing, beautifully carved. But be prepared for a shock. The poor old soul is wearing her glad rags in your honour—a scarlet skirt with a rich peacock pattern, and a blue and yellow satin blouse affair, with a coral necklace. On her head she's crammed an old felt hat, one of Rudge's, I suspect, with a feather stuck into the band. Emma's tried to soften the blow by lending her a long dark coat, but Margie has unbuttoned this and flung it back off her shoulders like a duchess."

"Poor old thing!" muttered Charles. "Come, Val, we must see she isn't hurt or neglected. She caught the bead Jeremy threw to her, and gave it to Lyntie, so indirectly she's responsible for our going to Australia together."

Knowing that she could safely leave Margie to Valerie and Charles for a while, Lyntie joined the Rector and Mrs. Halliday, who were talking to the Pennrose-Eyres.

"Have you seen Margie?" she asked. "Go out of your way to be nice to her, won't you? She's a very special friend of mine."

"Then she will be a friend of ours," declared the doctor gallantly. "I'm looking forward to meeting Margie. She's an interesting case."

"You and your cases!" scoffed his wife. "Margie's a person. Not a number in a book or on a file."

"Jefferson's just been telling us about Rep, Lyntie," put in the Rector. "I hope he won't misbehave to-day."

"So do I," Lyntie assured him. "He's already said 'Bless the bride!' to both Sally Sudweeks and Margie. I only hope he won't say something awful at the critical moment."

"Have you seen Desmond, Lyn?" asked Mr. Halliday. "I think that's the Fellowes arriving, and perhaps he can help."

"Don't worry, Mr. Halliday, Dakers understands Cynthia now, and Mackintosh is there to superintend matters. If you'll excuse me, I think Cynthia had better go straight to the library. It's cosy in there, and she adores Rep."

"No accounting for tastes," chuckled the doctor, as Lyntie whirled away.

Strange to relate, Cynthia and Margie took an instant liking to each other, and soon Margie was crouching beside Cynthia's couch, telling her stories.

"Are you quite sure she's safe, Miss Lyntie?" fussed Mackintosh. "Emma says she's real queer."

"In a way she is hurt in her mind, Hydrotite, but she won't harm Cynthia. She is good and kind and gentle, and Cyn will love her stories. Probably they are the ones she used to tell little Master Jeremy long ago. Or possibly she'll talk about the birds and the flowers. Cyn loves birds. You go and enjoy yourself, and don't worry. Daybreak's helping Mr. Mortimer's new butler, and so Primmy is lonely. Go and talk to her. Poor Mrs. Rudge is upset, too. Her lord and master didn't approve of Margie coming to the party."

"Miss Lyntie, this is my father and mother," said Jimmy Carter, as Mackintosh went off, partially if not completely reassured.

"How do you do, Mrs. Carter? I hope you don't mind Jimmy being an Octocat."

"I don't hold with it at all, miss, but his father's weak, so what can I do?"

Lyntie longed to say "laugh and grow fat" when she saw how thin Mrs. Carter was, but instead, she turned to Mr. Carter and said:

"You're one of the nice grown-ups, Mr. Carter, who humour us kids without spoiling us. Jimmy's a fine Octocat. He's quick and intelligent and brave. There, Jimmy, don't blush. Go and see about tea for your parents. I'll bring them to the dining-room."

"Lovely old place, this," remarked Mr. Carter.

"Must cost a mint of money to keep going," broke in Mrs. Carter.

"It does, I suppose, but it's worth it," said Lyntie. "My sister and I lived in a tiny cottage for years, so you can imagine how we love beautiful big houses. Do you know my uncle, Mrs. Carter?"

"Can't say as I do, miss, though my husband's sister is his lodger-keeper."

"Of course, I'd forgotten for the minute that Tilly and Jimmy were cousins. There are Mr. and Mrs. Muzzle. Wouldn't you like to join them for tea? Tilly, here's your Aunt Jane."

Lyntie smiled and was gone. She did not feel equal to too big a dose of Mrs. Carter. Poor Jimmy! But his father looked nice. If only he'd exert himself more! Oh, well, perhaps he got more in his own quiet way; such people often did.

"Lyntie, go and see how things are going in the big drawing-room," called Jeremy. "We're having the speeches there, you know."

"Of course I know," Lyntie laughed. "Don't get het up, Jeremy. You aren't the blushing bridegroom. I'll cut along and see if the chairs are in nice neat rows."

Arranging chairs at intervals and talking continuously, Lyntie found Inspector Pentland and Mr. Lutwyche. With them, but sitting comfortably by the fire, was Sir Bernard.

"Hello, Lyntie, what is it this time?" questioned her uncle. "Still playing the game?"

"I'd forgotten it, but I'll begin again. You've been sitting so close to the fire that you're definitely red and bad."

"What's this?" demanded the Inspector. "Who or what am I?"

Lyntie considered.

"You're not fat and merry, and you're hardly pale and pettish, so I suppose you're lean and sad. Now don't ask me to place you, Mr. Lutwyche, because I can't. Jeremy's getting het up."

about things in here, so I said I'd look in and see all was well."

"I shall be glad when the whole business is over," declared Sir Bernard. "What are you moving those chairs for, Lyntie?"

"To make room for Cynthia's carriage. She'll want to hear everything. I'll put this small table next to her for Rep. Then, if I sit the other side, we can look after him."

"Rather you than me," grinned the Inspector. "This party's wearing it—police work is a lot easier."

"Our Jethargic Charlie doesn't think so," chuckled Lyntie. "He's escorting a feather-beddecked Sally Sudweeks round the house. When Rep saw her hat he squawked 'Bless the bride!' three times without stopping."

All three men laughed heartily.

"Have you had your tea?" Lyntie asked.

"Yes, Vanessa brought it to us here," Sir Bernard told her. "Where is everybody now?"

"Mostly teaing," Lyntie laughed. "Then they'll come on in here for the presentations. The Eversley people have asked Mr. Halliday to give the happy pair their gift—a fitted picnic case."

"Jolly wise of them," murmured Sir Bernard. "They might have chosen Charlie Chubb."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the Inspector fervently.

"The Marsdale few have been wise, too," said Lyntie. "They've chosen Jeremy to make their presentation. It's a framed water-colour of Marsdale, showing the Manor. Mr. Jefferson painted it for them and had it framed, for what they'd collected. He found out from Jeremy how much that was, and charged accordingly. Wasn't it sweet of him?"

"Jefferson's a sound fellow," declared Sir Bernard. "I'm glad you and Jeremy have become friends, Pentland. But as I told you, Lutwyche can make us all do what he wants. It was he who made me turn my house into a—zoo, and now he's made Jeremy accept the Manor."

"What do you mean about making Fairmeads a zoo?" burst out Lyntie.

"Well, I was peacefully living on my own till Lutwyche began nagging. Then I took you and Vanessa in, Lyntie, and see what's followed—first Tory and now Rep. Where will it end?"

"Don't tease," chuckled Lyntie. "You nearly worried yourself into your grave when Van was missing. Is everything ready now, Mr. Lutwyche? If so, the guests can begin to come in and take their seats while I grab some tea."

Soon every chair was occupied. The Octocats were all sitting together near Cynthia and Rep. Margie sat on the other side of Cynthia, with Dr. Ticehurst on her—Margie's—right. On the small temporarily erected platform sat Sir Bernard 'Allardyce, Mr. Halliday, Charles and Valerie, and Jeremy Marsdale. When Sir Bernard rose to speak, the audience clapped warmly. Glancing round, Lyntie saw Sally Sudwecks's hat beside Thubb's partially bald head. Mackintosh sat with Mrs. Mason and Mrs. Rudge and Mrs. Bardon. Vanessa was beside Miss Ticehurst, and Mrs. Halliday was beaming between Dr. and Mrs. Pennrose-Eyre. Everyone looked happy, and Lyntie suddenly realised how grateful she was to see so much happiness. If Vanessa had not returned, how different things would have been!

Sir Bernard spoke shortly and to the point; then Mr. Halliday and Jeremy Marsdale made the presentations. Charles's speech of thanks on behalf of himself and Valerie was gay and amusing. As he sat down, Lyntie turned to Rep and whispered: "Bless the bride! Go on, Rep, say it."

The parrot preened himself and looked round. His eye fell on Mackintosh sitting demurely at the end of the second row. Again Lyntie urged, and this time Rep opened his beak. But instead of blessing the bride, his raucous tones filled the room with the harsh cry:

"Hydro's tight. Hydro's tight."

"Cover him up, Lyn, quick," ordered Desmond. "It's—it's awful," he added, as the audience rocked with laughter. "Poor old Mackintosh!"

Having nothing better, Lyntie flung the light coatee she was wearing over the cage, and Rep subsided. But not for long. The coatee was not enough. As Sir Bernard closed the proceedings with a few suitable words and sat down, Rep, determined to please Lyntie and Sid, again lifted up his voice:

"Bless St. Bernard!" he shrilled. "Rep's a hero! Rep's a hero! Rep's a hell-falutin' hofficer of the Hoctocats."

